

HOW TO BE A SUPERCOMMUNICATOR AT HOME

The hardest discussions often happen at home. This guide can help resolve conflicts, share feedback, or simply connect on a deeper level with the people who matter most.

STEP 1

WHAT KIND OF CONVERSATION IS HAPPENING?

For more, see *Supercommunicators* pg. 29

- » *Look for clues if the conversation is:*
 - » *Practical (solving problems)*
 - » *Emotional (discussing feelings)*
 - » *Social (exploring interactions)*
- » *Ask how someone feels, rather than about facts.* (Instead of “What happened in math class?”, ask “What’s something you learned today that surprised you?”)

STEP 2

EXPLORE WHAT PEOPLE NEED

For more, see *Supercommunicators* pg. 68

- » *What’s something you want the other person to understand about you?*
- » *What’s one question you can ask to understand them better?*
- » *What’s your goal in this discussion?*
- » *What do you think is others’ goals?*

STEP 3

ASK ABOUT FEELINGS

For more, see *Supercommunicators* pg. 161

- » *Acknowledge emotions*
(“What’s something you wish I understood about how you’re feeling?”)
- » *Ask deep questions*
(“What’s something you’re grateful for, even on hard days?”)
- » *Ask if you can share your own feelings*
(“Can I tell you how your words make me feel?”)

STEP 4

PREPARE FOR OBSTACLES

For more, see *Supercommunicators* pg. 228

- » *Share your boundaries*
(“Let’s try to avoid blaming anyone and figure out where we agree.”)
- » *Acknowledge the awkward*
(“This is hard to talk about, but ...”)
- » *Consider asking someone to moderate*

STEP 5

MAKE ROOM FOR HOW WE SEE OURSELVES

For more, see *Supercommunicators* pg. 228

- » *Reflect on who you are*
(“What values or identities might be shaping how I approach this?”)
- » *Approach differences with curiosity*
(“Can you tell me why this is so important to you?”)
- » *Seek opportunities to share your own experiences*

Many of our most important discussions, particularly with our families, are made up of three distinct kinds of conversations. There is a practical, decision-making conversation: What's This Really About? There is an emotional conversation: How Do We Feel? And there is a social conversation: Who Are We? We are often moving in and out of all three conversations as a dialogue unfolds. However, if we aren't having the same kind of conversation as our partners, at the same moment, we're unlikely to connect and hear each other.

The Three Conversations



So, as parents, siblings, spouses and other family members, how do we figure out what kind of conversation is occurring? How can we learn to make our conversations better?

STEP 1

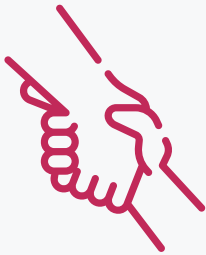
PAY ATTENTION TO WHAT KIND OF CONVERSATION IS HAPPENING

We all send clues, as we speak and listen, about what kind of conversation we're seeking. We hint at whether we're in a practical mindset, an emotional mindset, or a social mindset. And we can train ourselves to notice these clues.

Schools often train teachers to ask students: *“Do you want to be helped, hugged, or heard?”* Different needs require different types of communication, and those different kinds of interaction—helping, hugging, hearing—each correspond to a different kind of conversation—practical, emotional, social.

Do you want to be:

Helped?



*A practical
What's This
Really About?
conversation*

Hugged?



*An emotional
How Do We Feel?
conversation*

Heard?



*A more social
How Are We?
conversation*

When a teacher—or anyone—asks a question like *“Do you want to be helped, hugged, or heard?”*, what they are really asking is: *“What kind of conversation are you looking for?”* And people often know what they need – we just have to ask them.

However, for a parent, a sibling or a spouse, asking this kind of question can sometimes be tricky. I have two teenagers at home, and they think ‘hugged, helped, heard’ is cheesy. But most questions I ask seem to return one-word responses. (How was school? *Fine*. Did you have fun at practice? *Yes*.)

The solution is to ask what are known as “**deep questions**”: inquiries that invite our kids to talk about their experiences, or talk about their beliefs, or draw out their values. The key is, rather than ask them about the *facts* of their life, ask them how they *feel* about their day. For instance, with one of my kids, instead of asking him if he saw Brady at lunch, I

ask him: “**What makes Brady so fun to hang out with?**” Often, my son will say something surprising: that he likes Brady because he knows how to talk to girls, and suddenly we’re in a real conversation.

We can ask deep questions of everyone we want to connect with. Here’s a few I use with my kids:

Instead of Asking	Try Asking
<i>How was your day?</i>	<i>What made you happy today?</i>
<i>What should we do this weekend?</i>	<i>If you could create your perfect day, what would it look like?</i>
<i>Have you thought about your plans for next year?</i>	<i>If you could ask your future self one question, what would it be?</i>
<i>Why are you upset?</i>	<i>What’s something you wish everyone knew about you?</i>
<i>How was school?</i>	<i>What’s something you learned this week that surprised you?</i>
<i>Have you done your chores?</i>	<i>What’s your favorite chore?</i>
<i>What’s up with your friends?</i>	<i>What do you admire about your friends?</i>
<i>Do you like your teacher?</i>	<i>What makes your teachers great?</i>

If you ask someone how they feel about something—rather than about the facts of their life—we invite people to tell us who they really are, about their values,

beliefs, and experiences, and, most important, about what kind of conversation they are seeking.



STEP 2

SHARE YOUR GOALS, AND ASK WHAT OTHERS ARE SEEKING

Usually, each person enters a discussion with a specific goal in mind. We may not be fully aware of these goals — *I want to convince Liz to go on a beach vacation this year!* — but when we understand our own goals, as well as other people’s aims, the conversation is guaranteed to be more productive.

Often, the easiest way to determine our own goals, and figure out others’, is to ask a simple question: **“What’s most important to you in this conversation?”** Or, if the moment calls for a gentler approach, you could lead by example: **“I’d love to understand where you’re coming from. I was hoping to speak with you about next year’s vacation ...”**

Family members often have varied goals in the same conversation—someone might want to resolve a disagreement, while someone else is seeking empathy. Asking and sharing helps prevent conversations from derailing, enabling everyone to feel heard.

Here’s a few ways of starting a conversation with family members to figure out their goals in the discussion:

» *How can I best support you during this discussion?*

- » *Is there something specific you need, like advice or just a friendly ear?*
- » *What would make this conversation most helpful for you?*
- » *What would you like to happen by the end of our talk?*
- » *Do you want to brainstorm solutions, or talk about how you’re feeling?*

When it comes to figuring out our own goals, there’s some questions we can quickly ask ourselves before a conversation begins that helps us understand what we’re looking for:

- » *What do I hope to achieve from this conversation?*
- » *Am I looking for understanding, resolution, or just to express my feelings?*
- » *What’s one thing I want the other person to understand about me?*
- » *What’s one question I can ask that will help me understand them?*
- » *What outcome would feel most satisfying to me?*
- » *What question or topic do I hope to avoid?
How will I react if it comes up?*

STEP 3

ASK ABOUT OTHERS' FEELINGS, AND SHARE YOUR OWN

Emotions are often at the core of family discussions. Our emotions help us build connections and understand each other. But if they aren't acknowledged, they can make us feel alone.

It's good to begin a discussion by creating space for emotions by asking gentle, open-ended questions like, "How has this been feeling for you?" or "What's your take on this, in term of how it makes you feel?" The key is to show curiosity.

It's also often important to share your own feelings. For instance, you might say, "This has been overwhelming for me; I'd love to know what it's been like for you." This encourages reciprocal vulnerability, opening a space where emotions can be safely shared.

Here are a few ways to invite emotions into a conversation, and what we can say when we hear an emotion:

Can you help me understand how this has been affecting you?

What's something you wish I understood about how you're feeling right now?

What's something you're grateful for, even on hard days?

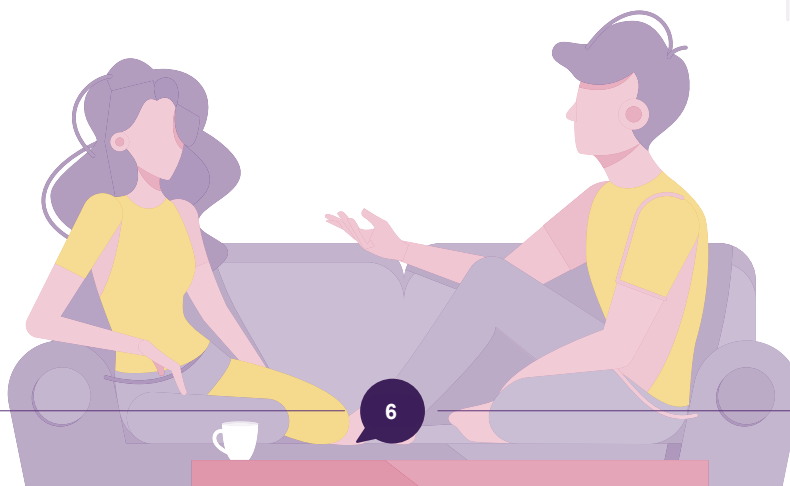
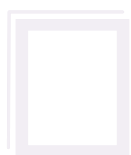
I can see this means a lot to you. What part feels most significant?

This has been challenging for me, too. What do you need most from those around you?

Would it be okay if I told you how your words affect me?

Can I share how I've seen others handle this?

Creating space for emotions and reciprocal vulnerability opens the door to trust. When we invite our loved ones to feel seen and understood - through empathy and curiosity - our conversations become more meaningful and real.



STEP 4

PREPARE FOR OBSTACLES

Will people get angry? Withdrawn? Will a hesitancy to say something that might ruffle feathers prevent us from saying what's important? What happens if someone starts to shout?

And most important, when those obstacles appear, what's the plan? Research shows that being aware of situations that make us anxious or fearful – and planning for what we'll do – can not only relieve worry, it makes conversations go much better. How will you calm yourself and others if the conversation gets tense, or encourage someone who has gone quiet to participate more? It's worth envisioning possible scenarios – and

jotting down what you'll do if they emerge. The plan is what keeps us on track.

For particularly important conversations, it's often helpful to start by discussing a conversation's guidelines – and acknowledging that this might be uncomfortable. It's useful to say something like, "I know this is a tough topic, and I might say the wrong thing without meaning to, and I hope you will forgive me. And I promise, if you say something wrong, I will forgive you." Finally, for conversations that are particularly tense, a moderator might help.

At the beginning of discussion

Establish the guidelines

- What are the norms?
- No blaming, shaming or attack.
- Are questions okay?

A moderator can encourage

- everyone to speak
- people to tell our own stories and not diminish other's problems.
- anyone to listen.

Draw out everyone's

- emotional goals.
- practical goals
- more ephemeral goals that stem from our identities.

Acknowledge this will be uncomfortable

- We may misspeak
- We may ask naive questions
- When those discomforts emerge, we won't shut down. Rather, we'll see them as opportunities to learn.

STEP 5

EXPLORE IF SELF-IDENTITY IS IMPORTANT TO THIS DISCUSSION

In a family discussion, we are often asking ourselves and the people we care about a basic question: “Who Are We?” This isn’t just about family roles – it speaks to something deeper: our identities, the impact we have in each other’s lives, and the values that connect us. For instance, when we talk about whether we should visit our grandmother, we’re also asking ourselves: What do we owe to our elders? How do we set an example for our kids and siblings? We might see things differently – *I think we should go to the beach rather than visit grandma!* – but when we discuss these identities, we learn more about who everyone is, and how our values and identities influence our decisions. Even if we don’t always agree about everything, we feel seen.

For difficult discussions on identity-centered topics like politics or lifestyle choices – *I’m old enough to decide what who I date!* – preparation is the first step. Take a moment to reflect on your own identity, and ask yourself what you hope to learn or understand. Then enter the conversation ready to listen with genuine curiosity.

Next, try sharing your own story to help family members feel comfortable opening up. Saying something like, *“You know, I didn’t really like spending time with my grandmother, either. But I think it’s important to be there for people when they need us. Are there times your grandmother has been there for you?”*

Family Guide for Conversations About Identity

Step	Focus	Questions to Ask:
1 Preparation	Reflect on what you hope to learn.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» <i>Why are you having this conversation?</i>» <i>How can you show curiosity, rather than judgement?</i>
2 Listen & Empathize	Show genuine curiosity.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» <i>Ask questions like, “What about this feels meaningful to you?” or “Can you tell me why this is so important?”</i>» <i>Let them respond and prove you are listening with “What I hear you saying is ...”</i>» <i>Then ask if you got it right.</i>
3 Share & Relate	Share relevant personal experiences.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">» <i>Offer stories that show empathy (e.g., “I remember feeling the same way ...”).</i>» <i>Describe your own struggles.</i>

Example Questions

After saying:

Ask:

<i>I understand it's important to you to attend this particular school.</i>	<i>Can you tell me why you feel so strongly about being accepted into this specific college?</i>
<i>It can be hard to be someplace new. Sometimes I feel out of place, too.</i>	<i>What are the parts of your day where you feel like you belong? Which parts are hardest?</i>
<i>I'm still learning about gender identity, but I want to support you.</i>	<i>What should I know?</i>
<i>I'm voting for a different candidate than you, but I want to understand how you see the world.</i>	<i>Can you tell me why this person is so meaningful for you?</i>



SUMMARY

Family conversations can be hard. In fact, they are some of the hardest discussions we'll ever have – but also the most important and rewarding. Those hard conversations are at the core of who we are.

Recognizing whether a conversation is practical (What's This Really About?), emotional (How Do We Feel?), or social (Who Are We?) allows each person to express what they need from this discussion. It creates the space to explain how we see ourselves, and what's important to us. It reduces misunderstanding and creates room for deeper, more meaningful sharing. When we talk to our families, and invite them to be emotional, or social, or practical, and when we ask genuine questions, and prove we are listening – at those moments our family conversations transform from everyday exchanges into powerful moments of connection.

