



## GOOD QUESTIONS

By Marilyn Sharpe

As a mom, I wasn't very good at asking questions. Usually they sounded like this: How was your day? What did you do today? The answers I received were grunts, hunched shoulders, or the single word, "Fine," delivered in a breezy voice or a snarl. At the end of questioning my kids, I knew nothing and had alienated them with my perceived meddling.

But those weren't the worst questions I asked. Try a few of these on for relational size:

Why did you...? Why didn't you...? How many times do I have to tell you...? What were you thinking? These slammed the door shut on further conversation, relationship building, or enjoying time together.

So what do I wish I had done differently?

**SETTING AND CONTEXT:** Consider where and when you ask questions. Do you have your child's undivided attention and does your child have yours? Do you have time to spend on a conversation? Have you turned off the distractions? Are others listening in? If this is a time of conflict, tension, or high drama, postpone this conversation until peace reigns. Great conversations depend on deep, respectful listening, with a generous amount of time to spend together. With youth, talk in the dark (the carpool after other kids have been dropped off, walk the dog, do a project together, tuck your teen into bed ... or, if they stay up later than you, have them tuck you in!). If talking isn't working, write a note or pass a journal back and forth, asking and answering one another's questions. Make a date with just one kid to do something your child wants to do with you. Then, do it. Tell your child how much that time together meant. Remember it together. Do it again. This is not a time for correcting table manners, criticizing friends, or grilling about academic performance. This is a time where the only goal is to know and love one another better.

**THE QUESTIONS THEMSELVES:** My biggest mistake was asking "closed" questions, the ones that can be answered with one word. They sound like: Where are you going? Do you have homework? Did you clean your room? They close down the conversation.

Better questions are "open" questions, the ones that begin a conversation. They are generous, interested, and engaged. They are an invitation to deepen the relationship. They say, "I want to know you better. I want to know who you are." They sound like: What qualities of a friend do you value in Ben? If you could spend a day doing anything you wanted, how would you fill your day? What is hard for you about the soccer team this year? If you could change one thing about the world, what would it be and why?

When I've inadvertently asked a closed question, I've learned to ask the follow up, "Tell me more."

**THE ART OF LISTENING:** This is a conversation's most important ingredient. No one is a better conversationalist than the one who listens, really listens to you. Give undivided attention. Ask further questions and give evidence of understanding and interest. Nod, smile, lean toward the speaker. Don't interrupt. Do remember what has been said. Ask about it as a follow up.

In Genesis 3:9, after humankind had already broken the relationship with God by sinning, God restored the relationship by asking a question, "Where are you?" Can't we follow this divine example of building bridges to one another with a good question?

### FAMILY ACTIVITIES: A COLLECTION OF GOOD QUESTIONS

Try some of these on a walk, at the beach, around the picnic table, or at the bedside of a child you love.

1. What are the best things about being your age?
2. What are the hardest things about being your age?
3. What do you wish I knew about your life now?
4. What makes you most proud?
5. For what do I need to ask your forgiveness? Will you forgive me?
6. Where or when or how did you experience God today?
7. For what can I pray for you today?