Take Back Your Kids: How to Teach and Get Respect
by William J. Doherty, Ph.D.

We are facing an epidemic of insecure parenting. We may now have the most child-sensitive generation of parents the world has ever known—and the most confused and insecure. This generation has determined not to repeat the mistakes of its own parents, who expected unquestioning obedience. But in rejecting outmoded models of authority, parents are now skittish about exercising any authority at all.

Children raised with insecure parents grow up too soon, become preoccupied with consumer goods and peer acceptance, and focus their lives on frenetic activity outside the home. They know that their parents love them deeply and want to communicate sensitively with them, but they also know that their parents are unsure about what to require of them and how to say “no” to them.

A family now in therapy has a 10-year-old boy, who is an angel in school, but who has started to call his mother a “bitch” at home. Rather than exercising legitimate authority, his mother responds by feeling sorry that her son is so distraught. (An appropriate exercise of parental authority: “You may not speak to me like that EVER, not even when you are angry. Go to your room and come back when you have a letter of apology.”

Another example: Our local newspaper has been running a series on alcohol and teens. Kids in earlier generations drank alcohol, often to excess. The difference now, as documented in the newspaper articles, is that parents supply the keg of beer, the house or hotel room, and the funds to enjoy a Mexican frolic of booze and sex during spring break. Most parents who were interviewed were reluctant to let their children go on a Mexican spring break this year, but were unable to say “no,” particularly when most of the other kids announced they were going.

The Consumer Culture of Childhood

In the new culture of childhood, children are viewed as consumers of parental services, and parents are viewed as providers of parental services and brokers of community services for children. What gets lost is the other side of the human equation: children bearing responsibilities to their families and communities.

Children should not only receive from adults but also actively contribute to the world around them, help care for the younger and the infirm, add their own marks to the quality of family life, and contribute to the common good in their school and communities. If children live only as consumers of parental and community services, then they are not active citizens of families and communities.

If we see ourselves only as providers of services to our children, we end up confused about our authority, anxious about displeasing our children, insecure about whether we are providing enough opportunities, and worried that we are not keeping up with the output of other parents. In a market economy, the service provider must offer what is newest and best, and at all costs, must avoid disappointing the customer.

When applied to the family, this is a recipe for insecure parents and entitled kids. (One 17-year-old said to his parents, “Why should I mow the lawn? It’s not my lawn.”)
We also live in the era of therapeutic parenting. The parent becomes a junior therapist, and the child is seen as requiring special treatment that only a professional—or a trained parent—can provide. Starting back in the 1970s with Parent Effectiveness Training, a then popular book by Thomas Gordon, parents have been taught to act like therapists with their children.

A therapist is supposed to be consistently attentive, low key, accepting, non-directive, and non-judgmental. When the child acts up in a therapy session, say, by speaking disrespectfully to the therapist, the therapist’s job is to explore the underlying reasons rather than focus on the child’s immediate behavior. In addition to distorting parents’ reactions to their children’s misconduct, the therapeutic culture of parenting suggests that children’s psyches are fragile, easily broken by a parent who says the wrong thing.

The reality, according to loads of research, is that, if underlying parental care and attachment are present, most children are resilient in the face of ordinary mistakes in parenting. If children can handle most of our non-abusive mistakes, they can certainly handle our strong responses to them when these responses are fully called for. Children mostly know when they are off base, and feel safer when their parents step in assertively.

We know from research and observation that parents have a strong influence on their teenagers’ behavior. Teenagers whose parents talk to them regularly about avoiding drugs are much less likely to use drugs. Teenagers whose parents give them both nurturing and firm limits are less likely to be involved in sexual activity. They are also more likely to study hard.

The Therapeutic Culture of Parenting

We can restore parents’ confidence in their authority without returning to authoritarian parenting. There is a middle way between being dictatorial and insensitive on the one hand, and cajoling and debating with children on the other hand.

A personal example: When my son Eric was 13, we had a brief but memorable encounter in the kitchen. I was on the telephone with a friend in the early evening. Unbeknownst to me, Eric wanted to make a phone call to one of his friends. When I hung up the phone, Eric said to me, in an irritated, peremptory tone of voice, “Who was that?”

Parents need to assert their right to respect.

How do you think I should have responded? Consider several possible responses I could have made, and then I’ll tell you what I actually said.

Response 1 (delivered in a mildly defensive tone): “I was on the phone with Mac. I didn’t know you wanted to use the phone.”

The problem with this response is that it accepts the child’s right to grill the parent about adult activities. The key is not the question itself, but the disrespectful demand.

Response 2 (delivered with a mild reprimand): “I didn’t know you were waiting to use the phone. You should let me know. How am I supposed to know?”

This might be an appropriate response to a spouse or another adult peer who has equal rights to the telephone and is therefore free to express annoyance if you are clogging its use. Said to Eric, however, it would have accepted his implied claim of peer status, like a sibling he competes with for use of the shower or TV.

Response 3 (delivered with a stern reprimand): “Who do you want to call anyway? You are on the phone far too much. You should be doing your homework.”

This counterattack appears strong but misses the main point: The problem of the moment is not Eric’s phone use but his disrespectful question. To simply assert parental authority over his phone use would make him resentful and would not teach him about this disrespectful action or forestall his next.

I’ve made my share of mistakes as a parent, but somewhere I learned to have an instant awareness when one of my children is talking disrespectfully to me—and to make that the point of my response. So here’s what I said, making eye contact and speaking firmly:

You don’t get to ask me that question, and particularly in that tone of voice.

The discussion was over. Eric absorbed my comment and then went to the other room to make his phone call. I did not name the person I was on the phone with. I did not defend myself. I did not counterattack. I did not make Eric defend his question. I did not punish him.

What I did was to directly defend and assert my right to respect as a parent. And I did not feel angry at him during the rest of the evening. During the subsequent years ahead we had the normal parent-adolescent hassles, but he never spoke disrespectfully to me again.

If I had taken a different path that evening, one that would lead to similar encounters in the future, my son’s adolescence and our family life might have been much different.

Teaching Respect to Young Children

Four-year-old Jason developed the annoying habit of demanding his food. At dinner, he would shout, “Pour me milk!” or “Give me more French fries!”

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It’s not as if Jason had an impulse control disorder. He was a model of appropriate behavior in preschool where the standards for politeness were clear and consistently enforced.

How did Jason’s parents respond to his demanding behavior? Often they tried to shut him up by immediately fetching what he demanded. Other times they got irritated with him and told him to ask nicely—but they still fetched his food without making him ask politely. Psychologists describe this as reinforcing the child’s behavior.

Parents whose children treat them disrespectfully will eventually start to fear and resent their children. Parents will start withdrawing emotionally, or become punitive. They will have explosions of anger they feel bad about later. Or they will become sarcastic and passive-aggressive.

How did Jason’s parents turn around his behavior at meals? They firmly challenged him every time he asked for something rudely and waited for him to politely restate his request before giving him the item. If he refused to ask politely, they withheld the food item and went about finishing the meal. Jason eventually learned the meaning of “polite,” and the incidence of demanding behavior at the table declined drastically.

**Why Anger-Free Parenting Doesn’t Work**

To many parents, anger is one short step away from verbal and physical abuse of children. But anger is a normal human emotion that signals “something’s got to change here—right now.” Without anger, parents are wishy-washy in the face of their children’s willfulness. Fear of showing anger to our children is at the heart of the impotence problem among many contemporary parents.

**Occasional parental anger is necessary.**

Recently I observed the following scenario: A boy (about 4) and his mother were walking on the beach. The boy ran ahead. He went under a fence and into a flower garden that was about 6 feet from a 30-foot drop to the railroad tracks below.

As she approached her son, I heard the mother say to him in a very mild tone, “Sweetie, I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to be back there.”

The boy stood and waited for her to arrive. Leaning over the fence, she put out her arm and said:

**Jeffrey, come. Please get out of there. Those are flowers you are standing in, and you are too near the tracks.**

Motionless and defiant, the boy just looked at her. “Here, take my hand,” she pleaded. Still no movement. It was clear that the child was enjoying this moment of stubborn victory.

As my wife and I continued our walk, I looked back for a while to see if there was any progress. The mother was leaning as far as she could over the fence and begging her son to take her hand, while he stared at her.

Scenes such as this one point out the danger of anger-free parenting. Trying to remain cool and rational in a situation of defiance and danger makes parents look foolish.

**Problematic Advice From the “Experts”**

No parenting expert would have supported the mother’s pitiful pleading approach to this problem, but how would experts suggest she respond?

Thomas Gordon’s Parent Effectiveness Training would tell the mother to calmly deliver an “I message” such as, “I get very scared when I see you standing there because it’s dangerous.”

The assumption is that your child will spontaneously decide to cooperate if you express your true feelings.

But what if your child, like the boy behind the fence, is enjoying seeing you afraid in demonstrating your lack of control over him? Sharing your vulnerable feelings is not going to get the job done in that case.

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**How to Expect and Get Respect**

1. **Respect Your Child.** Let your children express their own opinions, tastes, and values—if they do so respectfully.

2. **Expect respect.** Respect should be an expectation in your family because without it, little else will go well. Use terms such as “respect,” “disrespect,” “polite,” and “rude” to develop a common language of respect.

3. **Explain your new policy on respect to your children.** If they’ve been previously allowed to get away with disrespect, many children are unaware that they are being disrespectful. Meet with your kids at a quiet time to explain your new policy.

4. **Tune your ears to the sound of respect and disrespect.** Sometimes parents fail to recognize the sound of their child’s disrespect because they may be focusing too much on the content of what is said (interruptions, accusations, name-calling) and not listening to the child’s tone of voice. A raised voice is not necessarily a sign of disrespect, but attacking, intrusive, sarcastic, and mean words and tone are.

5. **Nip disrespectful behavior in the bud.** Respond immediately by saying sharply, “That was disrespectful.”

6. **Use a special tone of voice in response to disrespect that communicates to your child, “You’re in dangerous territory—back off immediately.”**

7. **Use time-outs for non-cooperation when the child will not stop the disrespectful behavior.** After pointing out the disrespectful behavior in a firm voice, if your child continues, give a warning that a time-out will be enforced if they don’t stop. If that doesn’t work, enforce the time-out. Don’t allow a nasty conversation to continue. With a teen, you may want to walk away from the conversation rather than try to enforce a time-out against physical opposition. The key is to pronounce the behavior as disrespectful and end the conversation rather than letting it escalate.

8. **Be firm but keep your cool.** Confident parenting is almost always calm, clear, focused, and assertive in times of conflict.

9. **Combine zero tolerance with a long-term view.** Challenge every disrespectful behavior—without exception—because that’s the only way your child will understand your expectations and the meaning of the behavior you want to extinguish. Don’t expect an immediate cessation of rudeness, but a steady decrease towards zero.

10. **If the problem is chronic and these strategies don’t work, consider seeking family therapy to focus on your parenting skills.** If you and your spouse or co-parent can’t agree on a parenting style, consider getting professional help.
Another major school of parenting advice from the 1970s (written about extensively by Haim Ginott) would recommend a “consequences” approach. You would give your son a choice: If he continues to stand there, he is choosing to accept a negative consequence you have promised. You could tell him that there will be no more walks this week unless he cooperates.

Laying out consequences and waiting for the child to make a choice is a normal technique for effective parenting. When your teenager won’t do the dishes in a timely fashion, it’s generally better to connect the chore with a consequence—say, no watching TV or talking on the phone that evening—and let the child choose to cooperate. Continued non-cooperation means escalating consequences, until almost all kids will decide it’s less hassle to do the dishes.

A limitation of the consequences approach to discipline, however, is that it is not powerful and immediate enough for some situations. The defiant little boy in the flower bed required a stronger response than the mother laying out the consequences for his continuing to stand there. In moments of willful confrontation, some children don’t care about future consequences—they want things their way right now, thank you. In these situations, discussing future consequences rather than rising to the occasion comes across as weak.

What most of the rational, anger-free parenting advice misses is the importance of occasional angry power assertions by a parent. I say “occasional” because research has clearly pointed out that rigid, authoritarian parenting (“I’m the boss; be quiet and do what you’re told”) doesn’t explain the reasons for a directive or allow kids to express a point of view, is counter-productive because it tends to breed anxiety and rebellion.

Appropriate Power Assertion

What do I mean by appropriately angry power assertion? In the case of the mother and her defiant boy, I would call him by name and say in a strong, loud voice: “JEFFREY, GET OUT OF THERE RIGHT NOW!” I would be moving towards him as I said these words.

If he did not immediately move back towards the fence, I would shout “COME HERE!” as I arrived at the fence.

If he did not instantly move towards me, I would climb the fence and retrieve him physically. Then I would get down face to face with him, and say:

I am FURIOUS with you. First, you went under a fence and into the flowers—and you know better. Second, you were near your railroad tracks—and you know better. And third, you did not come back when I told you to. You are in big trouble with me.

I would take him home, with no further discussion.

Later in the day, I would talk calmly with him about what happened on that walk, and what level of cooperation I wanted on walks in the future. I would expect him to agree to cooperate better in the future.

There are psychological levels deeper than what I have described, levels that could be explored after the original power assertion is successful. Perhaps the child’s behavior, if it’s unusual for him, reflects the stress of a recent family move. Perhaps he is angry at his mother about something. Perhaps he is testing his newly found 4-year-old independence. On the other hand, if the behavior is chronic, then it also suggests a misalignment of authority between parent and child.

But whatever the deeper meaning of the boy’s risky, defiant behavior, the parent must deal with the immediate situation. If a child is stealing because of a troubled childhood, we must first stop the stealing; then we can talk about the underlying problem.

The new parenting problem is “anger phobia.” We end up with bland parents who refuse to ever show anger to their children. They consequently lack authority and allow their children to walk over them. In my experience as a therapist, however, I have found that such parents can take back their kids if they have a mind to.

Adapted from William Doherty’s Take Back Your Kids. Dr. Doherty is a family therapist and professor, Department of Family Medicine and Community Health at the University of Minnesota. He is the author or editor of 14 books, including The Intentional Family, Take Back Your Marriage, and Putting Family First. See www.drbilddoherty.com. (Click on book titles for hot links.)
The Power of a Positive Attitude and a Garbage-Free Mind
by Hal Urban

There are only two kinds of attitudes: good and bad. Your attitude is your control center. It’s a frame of mind—the way we view and approach every aspect of life.

We reap what we sow. If we have a positive attitude, we expect the best and act accordingly. If we have a negative attitude, we expect the worst and act accordingly.

Researchers at the Mayo Clinic have concluded that optimistic people live longer, are healthier, endure less stress, enjoy life more, deal more effectively with hardship, are more adventurous, have more friends, and are more successful in their careers.

Your attitude influences everything you do.

What Determines Attitude?

In my high school classroom, I wrote this question on the chalkboard: “What determines your attitude at any given moment?”

I gave all my students a half sheet of paper, and asked them to answer the question briefly. Here are the most common responses:

- It depends on the mood I’m in.
- The day of the week—bad mood on Monday, good mood on Friday.
- Where I am.
- What I’m doing.
- It all depends on who I’m with.
- Which class I’m in.
- The weather.

I said:

According to your answers, your attitudes are always determined by something outside yourself. You have no choice in the matter and no control over them. Your attitudes are held captive by people, places, times, things, and conditions.

The weather.

Wrong, wrong, wrong! I am now about to teach you the most valuable thing you’ll ever learn from me. Your attitude is a choice—the most important one you’ll ever make. You make this choice every minute of every day, and it will influence literally everything you do.

Look upon your attitude as the engine that runs your life. The most important thing to understand about this is that your attitude will ALWAYS be a choice, no matter what your circumstances are.

Bruce Diaso: An Amazing Attitude

When I was a sophomore at the University of San Francisco (USF), I met an 18-year-old freshman who had a profound effect on my life because he had the best attitude of anyone I’ve ever known.

Bruce Diaso had been a great high school football player and was planning to attend the University of Notre Dame on an athletic scholarship. But in his senior year, he was stricken with polio a few weeks before the Salk polio vaccine was available. He almost died, was in the hospital for several weeks, and ended up paralyzed. He could talk and move his head, hands, and fingers, but he couldn’t move his legs and arms.

Through sheer determination and hard work, however, he earned an academic scholarship to USF. His roommate and a few guys who lived in dorm rooms nearby were his caretakers.

Despite a lot of anger and self-pity, Bruce had the best attitude of anyone I’ve ever known.

Bruce was, without question, the most admired and loved student at the university in the four years he was there. He had a big smile and a good word for everyone. He was also a brilliant and unbelievably dedicated student. He wanted to learn everything.

One day, I got to eat lunch with Bruce alone. I asked him if he had been born with his incredible attitude. He laughed, and said,

No, Hal, I promise you I wasn’t born with this attitude. I developed it. I learned that it’s a choice, and that anyone can have the same attitude I have.

Bruce thought about it for a few days, and eventually chose two new words that would define his attitude: thankfulness and opportunity. He became thankful for all the things he used to take for granted. Among them were God (he believed there was a reason for everything), his family,

People with a GOOD ATTITUDE . . . People with a BAD ATTITUDE . . .

- are optimistic
- focus on what’s good
- see opportunities
- are thankful
- motivate themselves
- accept hardship and deal with it
- are determined
- are upbeat and lift others’ spirits

- are pessimistic
- focus on what’s bad
- see problems
- complain
- wait to be motivated
- feel sorry for themselves
- give up easily
- are downbeat and drag others down
friends, teachers, his country, intelligence, his education, and all the opportunities he saw in life despite his handicap.

I suddenly realized that I had all the same things in my life (without the handicap), and had always taken them for granted.

The most important thing Bruce taught me was that our attitude is our “control center.” He said:

Whether you’re in perfect health or have a handicap like mine, you can choose your attitude any minute of the day. Do you realize that being able to choose your own attitude is the greatest power and the greatest freedom you’ll ever have?

My conversation with Bruce that day turned out to be what I refer to as a “defining moment.” It changed my attitude, and it changed my life.

After graduating from USF summa cum laude and accepting a scholarship to its law school, Bruce’s success continued. Three years later, he again graduated with the highest honors. He turned down several high-paying salaries from prestigious law firms all over the country. Instead, he accepted a position as a public defender in his home town, did free legal work for charitable organizations, and devoted the rest of his life to helping people who were poor and in trouble.

Bruce’s paralyzed and weak body eventually gave out. He died when he was only 31. After the funeral, a good friend of mine who was one of Bruce’s caretakers for six years told me he learned more about life from Bruce than from anyone he’d ever known. During the time he lived with Bruce, he saw him in great pain and in poor health, but he kept going and always gave his best. And never once did he hear Bruce complain about anything.

Go 24 hours without complaining.

The “No Complaints” Challenge

I told Bruce’s story to my high school students every year since he died in 1972. It was a valuable lesson about the power and freedom we have to choose our attitudes no matter what the circumstances.

I also gave them an assignment called “The Bruce Diaso Memorial Challenge”: to go 24 hours without complaining about anything. It took 23 years before I found a student who could do it. She said:

I just thought of something I should be thankful for every time I started to complain. You know, we have a lot more to be thankful for than we do to complain about.

What Do We Let Into Our Minds?

Our attitude and our whole character are also influenced by what we let into our minds.

Every day of our lives we receive literally thousands of messages from a wide variety of sources. Think of all our choices within these sources:

- What do I watch on TV?
- What do I read?
- Which video games do I play?
- What do I view on the Internet?
- Who do I socialize with?
- What kinds of messages do I send and get via social media?

Zig Ziglar, a motivational speaker and wise author, used to say, “You are what you are because of what goes into your mind.” At a conference I once attended, he asked the audience:

Would you allow a person carrying a large bag of trash to walk into your living room and dump it all there?

Of course, we wouldn’t. Then he asked a second question:

Would you let anyone dump trash into your mind?

Unfortunately, we often do let people and popular culture dump trash into our minds.

Garbage In, Garbage Out

If we allow negative, mean-spirited, and sleazy information into our minds (Garbage In) on a regular basis, we will become a person whose values, words, and actions are negative, mean-spirited, and sleazy (Garbage Out).

For example: A person spends Saturday playing violent video games, viewing pornography on the Internet, and spending time with friends who are angry, negative, and disrespectful. That’s a whole day of Garbage In. If this is done on a regular basis, how do think this person will think, talk, and act? Chances are it will be Garbage In, Garbage Out.

But suppose someone spends Saturday reading good things, watching an uplifting movie, learning new information on the Internet, and spending time with family and friends in positive conversations. If this is done on a regular basis, how do you think this person will think, talk, and act?

Both research and common sense tell us it will be Good In, Good Out.

Adapted from 20 Gifts of Life: Bringing Out the Best in Our Kids, Our Grandkids, and Others We Care About by Hal Urban, an award-winning teacher-author. Hal’s other books include Lessons From the Classroom: 20 Things Good Teachers Do and Positive Words, Powerful Results. (Click on book titles for hot links or go to www.halurban.com.)

Fathers Can Influence Teens’ Sexual Behavior

Fathers’ attitudes toward teen sex and the emotional closeness of the parent-teen relationship have a sizable influence on adolescent sexual behavior, according to a new review of studies in Pediatrics (October, 2012).

The research review found that teens whose fathers disapproved of adolescent sex delayed sexual activity longer. In addition, teens who were emotionally close to their fathers tended to delay sexual activity.

Previous studies have shown that parents who monitor and discipline their teens and communicate with them reduce their teenagers’ risk of being involved in sex.

For additional research and resources, go to www.cortland.edu/character and click on Character-Based Sex Education. Sample articles:

- Tom Lickona’s “10 Emotional Dangers of Premature Sexual Involvement” and “Tolerance, Diversity, and Respect for Conscience: The Neglected Issue”
- Brad Wilcox’s “A Scientific Review of Abstinence and Abstinence Programs”

Register for Tom Lickona’s May 3 workshop on preventing bullying & promoting kindness: www.cortland.edu/character
Family meetings can solve family conflicts and foster kids’ moral development at the same time. By giving kids a voice in and shared responsibility for creating a happy family, we also strengthen our parental authority and leadership in the family. Successful family meetings have three parts: (1) achieving mutual understanding; (2) solving the problem in a way that’s fair to all; and (3) following through. A mother describes her first family meeting with James, 7, and Elizabeth, 5:

**Step 1: State the goal of fairness.**

Mother: James and Elizabeth, we’re having a problem with you two getting along. I’d like to talk with you about it and see if we can come up with a fair solution.

**Step 2: State the goal of understanding.**

Mother: First, I want you to understand how I feel about this situation, and then I want to find out how you feel.

**Step 3: State your view as parent.**

Mother: Kids, I get so irritated when I see the two of you fighting with each other. Then I start to yell at you, and everyone becomes upset. I would like to see the two of you try a little harder to get along.

**Step 4: Elicit kids’ feelings.**

Mother: I’ve told you how I feel. Now I’d like to hear each of your feelings.

James: Elizabeth always wants to do everything I do. She wants to sit in the same seat that I do, and she wants to play with the same toys. Sometimes she hits me.

Elizabeth: James punches me. He makes me cry. He won’t play with me. And I don’t like it when you yell, Mommy.

**Step 5: Restate kids’ feelings.**

Mother: James, you feel Elizabeth always wants to sit with you and play with you. Also, you don’t like it when she hits you. Elizabeth, you say that James makes you cry when he hits you and won’t play with you. And you don’t like it when I yell.

**Step 6: Have kids restate your feelings.**

Mother: Can you remember what I said about the situation?

James: You want us to try not to fight because it upsets everybody.

**Step 7: Brainstorm fair solutions.**

Mother: How can we make this situation better? Let’s make a list of things we can do that are fair to everyone.

**Mother’s commentary: Together we came up with these possible solutions:**

1. Don’t hit.
2. James should try to teach Elizabeth some of his games.
3. Mommy shouldn’t yell.
4. Elizabeth should try to find things to do by herself sometimes.
5. Everyone should say and do nice things.

**Step 8: Make a fair plan and sign it.**

We agreed on the following plan:

1. No hitting or yelling by anyone—Mommy, James, or Elizabeth.
2. James should play with Elizabeth at least once a day.
3. Elizabeth should try to play by herself sometimes.
4. Everyone should try to say and do nice things.

We all signed our agreement.

**Step 9: Plan a follow-up meeting.**

We posted our solutions on the frig. Next to that was a list for nice things said and done during the next two days. James agreed to record Elizabeth’s additions. We agreed to tell Dad about our plan and meet again in two days to see how we were doing.

**Step 10: Follow-up.**

We read the list of nice things people had said and done. We decided that everyone had indeed tried to be kinder.

Mother: James, I’m so pleased that you’ve included Elizabeth in your playing. I’ve had to speak to you only twice in two days. And Elizabeth, you are certainly trying to be nicer to everyone.

James: I’m glad you’re not yelling, Mommy. And Elizabeth hasn’t hit me.

Elizabeth: James played with me, and he let me sit in the bean bag with him.

The mother concluded:

Our home is happier now. We keep adding to the list of nice things we say and do for each other. Dad has also gotten involved. We’ll use this fairness approach to discuss other kid problems and even issues between my husband and me.

A fairness meeting can be brief. A 5-year-old wanted to play for 30 minutes with his older brother, while the older brother wanted private time. With parental mediation, they agreed to 15 minutes of joint play and 15 minutes of private time.

Consequences, if needed, can be built into the plan: Pick up your toys after you have been playing with them or lose them for two days; have the car home by midnight or lose driving privileges for two weeks. The main thing is that consequences be seen as fair.

Adapted, Raising Good Children by Thomas Lickona. Dr. Lickona is director of the Center for the 4th & 5th Rs. His other books include Educating for Character and Character Matters.
CONVERSATION STARTERS: Promoting Family Communication
by Tom Lickona

How can we increase meaningful and enjoyable conversation with family and friends? The art of conversation is largely the art of asking good questions—ones that draw out others' thoughts, feelings, and experiences. The following conversation starters can be used in one-on-one interactions between parents and kids, spouses, and friends or as group topics at mealtime or any other gathering.

1. What was the best part of your day?
2. What was the hardest part of today? How did you deal with it?
3. What's the good news and the bad news from today?
4. What are you grateful for today?
5. What happened today that you didn't expect?
6. What's something you learned today?
7. What was an interesting conversation you had today?
8. What's something you accomplished today?
9. How did you help someone today, or how did someone help you?
10. What is something someone in the family did recently that you appreciated?
11. Who has a problem that the rest of the family might be able to help with?
12. What's a book you're reading now or have read during the past year?
13. What are two things other people can do to make you happy?
14. What's something you're looking forward to?
15. If you could be granted three wishes, what would they be?
16. How can someone help you get out of a bad mood?
17. What is the most courageous thing you've ever done?
18. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?
19. How do you know if someone is the right person for you to marry?
20. What does “being in love” mean to you?
21. What does “success” mean to you?
22. Who is someone that you admire? Why?
23. If you had $100 to give to a charity, who would you give it to?
24. If you could have dinner with anyone from history, who would it be? Why?
25. What's one mistake you regret? What do you wish you had done differently?
26. Where would you most like to go on vacation?
27. What's a way you've changed in the past year (or two years)?
28. What is one of the hard things about being your age?
29. If your house was on fire, what is one thing you would try to pick up on the way out?
30. How did you get started (with a hobby, a sport, raising a family, your career or mission in life . . .)?
31. Share a happy or funny childhood memory.
32. Dear Abby: Read a letter to an advice columnist, but don't read the answer until everyone has had a chance to say the advice they'd give. Sample letter: “Dear Abby, I'm 15, I'm pregnant, and I'm scared to death to tell my parents. What should I do?”
33. New Year's: What are two goals you have for the year?
34. Looking back: What were two highlights of the past year (this summer, this winter)?
35. Bouncing question: One person asks another a question (such as any of the ones on this list), then that person asks someone else a different question, and so on, until everybody has been asked one. (If you don't wish to answer the question, request another.)
36. One-word topics: Choose any topic (school, sports, TV, movies, friends, heroes, clothes, God, prayer, decisions, music, politics, etc.). Anyone (in any order) can say any thing about the topic that comes to mind.

Other Conversation Resources
Family Dinner Project: http://thefamilydinnerproject.org/conversation/
Beauty and Bedlam: http://beautyandbedlam.com/conversation-starter-questions/