

How to Talk With Your Mentee

NEWSLETTER ARTICLE: APRIL 2006

It is exciting that at each home visit you have a lot of information to share with the mother or mother-to-be and her family. At some visits, it might seem easier to just start using the Parent Pack materials quickly and share all those important child development ideas and activities with the mom. However, a very important aspect of every ONE BY ONE home visit is the *informal conversation* between you and the mother or mother-to-be. During the *Engage* and *Encourage* section of the visit, be sensitive to the mother, ask about the mother's and/or baby's health, and to engage the mother in the give-and-take dialog of a conversation.

Open-ended questions are excellent tools to begin a conversation and to keep the dialog progressing. Questions that require more than a "yes" or "no" for an answer can create an opportunity for the mentor and the mother to reconnect. This type of question can also elicit answers from the mom which provide vital information about her and her needs. Some examples of open-ended questions are:

- If you had a free day, what would you like to do?
- What is your favorite hobby? Your favorite craft?
- What do you like to do in your leisure time activity?
- What is your favorite time of the day with your baby? Why?
- What is your most challenging time of the day with your baby? Why?
- Tell me about how school is going? Tell me about work?

There is an art to asking questions. One needs to be sensitive to the other person's feelings. Remember to sit down and stay on eye level with the mother. Sit with your hands folded or open in your lap. Do not fold your arms across your chest. Lean in with your upper body and make eye contact. Your body language lets the mother know you are really listening to her.

After you ask a question, always give the mother a moment or two to gather her thoughts. Even though the silence might feel a little awkward, wait for the mother to answer. Don't interrupt even if you feel you have a similar experience to share. Let the mother express her own thoughts and try not to speak for her. There might be opportunities later in the visit for you to share a similar experience or to share an idea. As the mother talks, nod your head, smile, and make other gestures that indicate you are actively listening to her.

Make a mental note of the mother's answers. Try to come back to her answers later in the visit and tie her comments to something else about the visit. This shows the mother you are really listening to her. As you get to know the mom and what she enjoys, select your monthly home visit gifts to reflect her interests. She will know by your selections that you really heard what she said.

What a wonderful encouragement it is to your assigned mother or mother-to-be when you actually listen to her, hear what she says, and respond to her! This is one of the highest compliments any of us can pay to another individual.

Linda Hibner