

## **Title: Welcome Back to School: Can We Talk?**

“Dad, if I get put in jail, will you still love me?”

I was startled and taken aback by my seven year-old son’s question. I was sitting on the edge of his bed as I did every night preparing him for ‘meemees’, or sleepy time. He slowly shifted and rolled onto his tummy for the obligatory back rub. He liked my rough hands. This ritual always followed his evening bath. He was dressed in his favorite Snoopy pajamas that still had the comforting fragrance of baby powder.

“Mijo (my son), I will *always love you*,” I gently whispered. “My love for you is super humongous. No matter what you do, I will always be there for you.” I paused to let it sink in and then I gently pressed him, “But I would definitely want to know why you were put in jail.” He smiled.

As a new school year approaches and families make their hectic, yet necessary, visits to the malls to buy clothes and supplies, it is important to emphasize another aspect of parenthood that has nothing to do with material necessities and everything to do with nurturing emotionally healthy children.

The beginning of school brings countless family conversations surrounding teachers, lunch, friends, and homework. More challenging are our attempts to get our children to open up, especially when we sense that something’s not right, or that they’re holding back. Indeed, the simple truth is that our children may never fully confide in us all that goes on in their lives. That’s normal. Just think back when we were young. Truthfully, did we ever do something that our parents never found out about? And maybe, to this very day, they still don’t know?

Children are acutely perceptive. This comes as no surprise given that 90% of a child’s brain develops by age five. They’re like innocent little sponges as they explore their environment trying to make sense of a complicated world. Add to that the sheer volume of stimuli that bombards their minds arriving at the speed of light through electronic devices. Indeed, it’s like trying to drink water from a fire hose. Some children may feel overwhelmed, withdraw, or timidly disengage from living.

A key research finding in successfully raising resilient children is the importance of fostering and sustaining healthy communication channels that begin early in a child’s development.

One such opportunity can occur during the proverbial bedtime ritual. This quiet time allows for deeper familial bonding and affords parents and children an opportunity to hold each other closer, figuratively and literally. In the safety and security of their rooms, children tend to naturally open up and ask questions that may seem awkward at any other time of the day. They may share their innermost anxieties and fears. In turn, we can reassure them, hence my son’s question and my response surrounding *unconditional love*.

And make no mistake, a consistent bedtime routine that includes heart-to-heart talks will pay off later as children mature into teenagers and begin navigating the many moral dilemmas, temptations and stresses that are surely headed their way. I can still vividly recall when as a principal I was dealing with a major drug bust on campus and escorting a disheveled teenager into my office followed by his weeping mother. In her desperation and anguish at seeing her son handcuffed, she implored him to speak to her and explain what happened.

“Why? You were always too busy to talk to me when I was a kid. Why now?” he coldly replied. And then he turned away.

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