

When Your Child Won't Tell You What Happened at School

When a child comes home upset but refuses to explain what happened, repeated questioning can make the conversation harder. Start by lowering the pressure. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends choosing times and places that are good for talking; a child who comes home tired may need time to rest or have a snack before a difficult conversation.¹ When your child is ready, focus first on listening rather than fixing. AAP guidance on active listening recommends giving full attention, reflecting back what you heard, and trying to understand the child's feelings and concerns before responding.² Use a small opening instead of an interrogation: "You seem quieter than usual. Do you want to tell me about it now, later, or after dinner?" If the child shares one detail, resist filling the silence with many questions. Reflect the detail, then ask one open question such as, "What happened next?" or "What part bothered you most?" AAP guidance also recommends open-ended questions because they encourage children to share more thoughts and feelings.³ If your child still does not want to talk, leave the door open and watch for patterns rather than demanding an immediate explanation. If a concrete school concern persists, contact an appropriate school adult and ask for observations, examples, and whether the problem appears isolated or repeated. The goal is to make disclosure easier, not to force it. Calm attention, patient listening, and one clear follow-up step are more useful than a rapid series of questions.

Did You Know?

- ✓ AAP guidance recommends choosing a good time and place for difficult conversations and allowing a tired child time to rest before talking.¹
- ✓ Active listening includes giving full attention, reflecting back what you heard, and focusing on understanding before responding.²
- ✓ AAP guidance recommends open-ended questions because they can encourage children to share more thoughts and feelings.³

Research Sources

1. American Academy of Pediatrics, HealthyChildren.org. "Communication Dos and Don'ts."
2. American Academy of Pediatrics, HealthyChildren.org. "Communication Skills Start at Home."
3. American Academy of Pediatrics, HealthyChildren.org. "Healthy Mental & Emotional Development: 4 Key Building Blocks."

Low-Pressure School Conversation Plan

Use this page to create one calm opening for conversation without turning the moment into an interrogation.

Child's name: _____ Date: _____

What I noticed: _____ Best time to talk: _____

1. Start With an Observation - About 2 Minutes

Name what you noticed without assuming why it happened.

I noticed: _____

2. Offer a Choice of Timing - About 2 Minutes

Let your child choose whether to talk now, after a break, or at another specific time.

Talk time: _____

3. Ask One Open Question - About 2 Minutes

Use one question that invites detail instead of a series of yes-or-no questions.

Question: _____

4. Reflect Before Solving - About 3 Minutes

Repeat the main point or feeling you heard before offering advice or asking another question.

What I heard: _____

5. Choose One Follow-Up - About 1 Minute

Decide whether to wait, check in later, document a pattern, or contact an appropriate school adult.

Next step: _____

What Parents Can Say: "You don't have to explain everything right now. I'm here to listen, and we can talk when you're ready."