Children's Home Society of North Carolina

Conversation Starters for Foster Families

HELPING CHILDREN FEEL SEEN, HEARD, AND SAFE

Building open communication is one of the most powerful ways foster families can help children feel safe and connected. For children who have experienced trauma, trust takes time—conversations should follow the child's pace, not pressure them to share. There is no need for perfect words. What matters most is showing interest, consistency, and care.

Conversation Starters by Age

For Young Children

Simple, playful questions help younger children connect without feeling overwhelmed.

1. "What was the best part of your day?"
2. "What do you like to play when you feel happy?"
3. "If you could pick dinner tonight, what would it be?"
4. "Who makes you laugh?"
5. "What is something you're really good at?

TIP! *Short questions are often easier than "why" questions, which can feel scary or overwhelming.*

For School-Age Children

These questions invite sharing while respecting boundaries.

1. "What was something interesting about today?"
2. "What do you like most ? about school right now?"
3. "What helps you feel calm when you are upset?"
4. "If you could change one thing about today, what would it be?"
5. "What is something you wish grown ups knew about kids?"

For Older Youth & Teens

Teens often open up in moments of shared activity rather than direct questioning.

1. "What is something you care a lot about right now?"
2. "What helps you feel supported by adults?"
3. "Who do you trust when life feels hard?"
4. "If you could visit anywhere, where would you go?"
5. "What is something you want more say in?"

TIP! *Conversations during car rides, walks, or activities can feel safer than face-to-face talks.*

For Foster Parents Who Struggle with Communication

If conversation does not come naturally—you are not alone. Some children communicate best through actions, play, silence, or behavior before they use words. That's okay.

Helpful Reminders:

- You do not need to fix or solve everything
- Listening matters more than responding
- Silence does not mean failure—it can mean safety
- Showing up consistently builds trust over time

Connection Can Sound Like:

"I am glad you told me."
"Thank you for sharing that."
"I am here whenever you want to talk."
"It is okay if you don't want to answer."

What Not to Ask or Say

Some questions—even if well intended—can reopen wounds or make children feel unsafe.

Avoid questions that can feel intrusive, triggering, or judgmental, like:

- "Why are you here?"
- "What happened to you?"
- "What did your parents do?"
- "Do you remember your trauma?"
- "Aren't you glad to be here now?"

Children deserve control over their stories. Sharing should always be their choice, on their timeline.

For the Village: How Friends & Family Can Help

Extended family, caregivers, teachers, and community members play an important role. When in doubt: keep it light, respectful, and child led.

Helpful things to say:

- "We are glad you are here."
- "You belong."
- "What do you like to do for fun?"
- "Let me know how I can support you."

Things the village should avoid asking:

- Questions about placement or past trauma
- Details about biological families
- "Before vs. now" comparisons

Supporting Conversations Without Rehashing Trauma

Focusing on the present helps children feel safe.

Try questions that emphasize:

- Feelings now, not what happened before
- Interests, strengths, and preferences
- Hopes, choices, and routines

Examples:

- "What helps you feel comfortable here?"
- "What does a good day look like for you?"
- "Is there anything you want us to know to support you better?"

CHS is Here to Support You.

Every conversation—big or small—builds trust and belonging. You don't need perfect words, just patience, presence, and care. We provide the training, guidance, and tools to help foster families communicate with confidence and compassion.

Want to become a licensed foster parent? Contact CHS today!

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