



Connection requires conversation

parenting in a digital age

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Raising faithful, empathetic, conversationally-confident Christian young adults requires a goodly commitment to conversation at home as a first place for training and nurturing.

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As parents we crave connection with our children. As parents we also desire our children to be connected to the people around them: friends, family, their community. Rich connection, authentic connection, empathetic connection, requires conversation. Designed by our relational Creator, conversation involves dialogue, eye contact, empathy, and presence of mind and heart as we view the person we are talking to with the integrity of being an image-bearer of the creator of relationship.

However, have the dazzle and demands of our digital communication technologies distracted us from the dialogue that trains us to listen, develop empathy, and grow confidence that we can both listen and be heard? In her book, *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age*, Sherry Turkle suggests with concern that digital technologies are bending us—and indeed encouraging us—away from conversation.

Let's consider some of the implications of this for parenting.

Connection

When we communicate in conversation there is more being communicated than the topic of the conversation. The real-life connection conveys so much more than words and emojis formed by pixels and backlit by electrons can ever do. With conversation, the words are alive. Maybe online words are not dead words, but it's worth pondering as parents if digital words are as life-giving to our children as words in conversation.

How can we structure our family life to nurture and grow conversation? Conversation is not always easy and we will have a number of yucky conversations through life. Training, modelling, and practising to talk to people starts in the family. This can't be developed while texting, posting, commenting, and liking—we will just get better at texting, posting, commenting, and liking.

Empathy

Turkle, in her research, notes a concerning reduction of empathy among teenagers. Her interviews with hundreds of teens highlight a correlation between a movement away from conversation (due to digital devices) and a decrease in the ability to empathise in the playground, classroom, and at home.

When I reflect on the moments when I have been most able to 'put myself in someone else's shoes', it has always come from talking with them. Christ-like empathy is a place in our hearts where we don't always go easily; we need to be taken there. Conversation leads the way. We can teach our children about empathy, and we can even model empathy. However, our children need to practise empathy through conversation.

Being heard

The rich and deep sense of affirmation that is possible when someone actually 'hears' us when we talk is an experience that we want for our children. This is especially so for our tweens and teens as they navigate through the minefield of working out who they are and where they belong—an important and yet often fragile stage of life.

Being heard in this way resonates within us because it is in harmony with our true identity—being image-bearers of the relational God of the universe.

However, are our conversational diets increasingly weighted towards digital 'talk' that can never give us the same deep rich sense of being 'heard'? It might even be that the teenage years are the least best time to be moving conversation to the digital.

Parenting with wisdom and compassion means that we have a particular role to play. Are we ourselves modelling to our children a commitment to nurturing conversation that encourages true hearing; are we guiding our children to conversation where they can be heard in a life-giving way.

Final reflection

Connection—deep, authentic connection—requires conversation. Raising faithful, empathetic, conversationally-confident Christian young adults requires a goodly commitment to conversation at home as a first place for training and nurturing. It also requires us as parents to be committed to modelling conversation; even the presence of a phone can hinder rich conversation!

I finish with a final reflection from Sherry Turkle:

We catch ourselves not looking into the eyes of our children or taking the time to talk with them just to have a few more hits of our email. Will we summon our attention if, a decade later, fearful of being alone but anxious about attachment, our children show us what it looks like to pay the price? It makes no sense to 'match' this disturbing possibility with a happy story about Facebook friendship or Twitter exchanges. This isn't a game in which we can cross our fingers and hope that the good will outweigh the bad. We want to take the good and also make the changes necessary so that we don't pay a price that no technology is worth. (p. 12). *

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