At some point, all parents must rely on others to tell them what is going on with their children. When ours were in day care, we knew what they ate, saw, and drew, and the frequency of diaper changes. It was easy to believe that we, as parents, were part of the action.

All that went out the window when real school started. Apart from injuries and stomach aches, the school day was one big black hole. From time to time, the school would invite parents in to observe the action, but it was clearly staged, and the children were not behaving as they would on a normal day.

Now the burden of finding out what is going on in school falls largely to the family dinner. We are a household that dines together. One of the benefits of having our dual incomes come from academia and public service is that we can all be at home by five or so. And that means dinners together almost every night.

There are studies showing that family dinnertime is a good thing. Dinner is where the meaningful conversations take place. From this, I take it that continual pleading to sit still or eat your vegetables or don’t wipe your dirty face on your shirt doesn’t cut it. At our dinner table that last one leads to instant shirt removal without replacement, so our dinners could, to an outside observer, look like a one-sided game of strip poker.

“How was your day at school?” meets the typical response: “Good” or “I don’t want to say”—this one always piques my interest, making the child wish he hadn’t said he didn’t want to say. Sometimes the response is more intriguing and we hear about playground politics and engage in thoughtful responses of how to deal with it.

“So-and-so won’t let me play this and that.”
“Well, have you tried asking nicely?”
“Yessss, it doesn’t work. They just tell me to go away.”
“Well, maybe this and that is pretty dull. How about doing something more interesting? You play something else and that just shows them!”
“There isn’t anything more interesting.”
“You know maybe I can just come into school and flog those creeps for ignoring you.”
“Dad, you’re not helping.”
And so it goes. On a good day we can find out that a child actually learned something (e.g., do long division), although more often than not they learned not to do something (e.g., leap off the fence). With the latter we can balance the affront to civil rights against a legitimate concern for public safety.

This is surely far removed from the intellectual discussion that is thought to be associated with dinnertime togetherness. We are supposed to reinforce the learning or journey together in a process of joint discovery. So sometimes one attempts to engage by dropping an interesting fact into the conversational mix:

“So they think they discovered water on Mars today.”
“We already have water here.”
“True and we have life here, too. If they find water on Mars that might mean there is life there, too.”
“Why can’t they just look around for the life and not bother with the water?”
“Well, it may be that the life died out many years ago. So the water indicates life might have been there.”
“In that case, the water didn’t do them much good, did it?”
“I guess not.”

When it comes down to it, maybe our problem is that we, as parents, try to take an increasingly active role in our children’s schooling while our children are becoming more independent and less in need of our intervention. Perhaps technology might one day provide the solution: the schools will keep us well informed about what our children are learning and what, if anything, is needed from us. Then we can just sit at dinner, eat, and smile knowingly at one another.

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