

Final Report

# Evaluation of the “Start the Conversation” Project

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## INTRODUCTION

Mealtime is a primary opportunity for parents and their children to engage and connect with one another, increase parent-child communication and socialization, and promote positive youth development (Fulkerson et al., 2010). According to the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University (2011), teens who have meals with their families five to seven times per week are four times less likely to use tobacco, two times less likely to use alcohol, two-and-a-half less likely to use marijuana, and four times less likely to say they may try using drugs in the future that compared to teens who eat with their family less than three times per week. Moreover, past studies suggest that the greater the frequency of youth having meals with their family, the less likely they have eating disorders and the more likely they increase their developmental assets, such as increased family support and cohesion and positive self-identity (Neumark-Sztainer, et al., 2008 and Fulkerson, et al., 2006).

In an effort to encourage Anchorage parents to have more meals with their children, Anchorage Youth Development Coalition (AYDC) partnered with Romig Middle School and conducted a pilot study of “Start the Conversation” project last academic year 2012-2013. The outcome of this pilot study was successful in that the project positively influenced quality of mealtime conversation. This academic year 2013-2014, AYDC partnered with several more Anchorage middle schools. In addition to Romig, Begich, Clark, Central, and Hanshew participated in the "Start the Conversation" project.

The “Start the Conversation” project involves providing a “Conversation Starter” packet to parents. This packet contains information on the importance of engaging families in having more meals with their children. It also had information about the benefits of family meals, tips to starting a conversation during meals, meal recipes, parenting resources, a parent’s handbook for raising healthy teens, and conversation starter cards. Also part of this project was evaluating the effectiveness of the Start the Conversation project in terms of increasing the number and quality of meals of parents with their children. We hypothesized that if parents receive the Conversation Starter packet, their number of family meals and their quality of mealtime conversation would be increased.

## METHODS

### Study Design

We used pre- and posttest study design to determine the effectiveness of “Start the Conversation” project. For pre-test, we handed out a self-administered survey questionnaire to Clark, Begich, Central, Hanshew, and Romig parents. The pre-test survey was brief. It asked how many times they ate meals with their children in the past week; what is the quality of their mealtime conversation with their children; and some personal information, such as their name, phone number and email, so that we may be able to follow them up for the post-test survey.

For the posttest survey, we did not follow-up with all the parents who completed the pretest survey. Rather, we selected a sample from those who participated in the pretest survey that is large enough to be representative of all the participants in the project and to perform appropriate statistical test. For posttest, we either called or emailed the selected participants. We again asked them about the number of family meals they had in the previous week and the quality of their mealtime conversation. Additionally, we collected information regarding how they use the Conversation Starter packet.

### Data Collection

We distributed the pre-test survey questionnaires and the “Conversation Starter” kit to parents from the five different middle schools. For Begich middle school, we distributed the survey and the packet during the Parent’s Night on September 10<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and the Family Dinner Night on October 24<sup>th</sup> 2013. For Clark Middle School, the survey and the kit were handed out during the Parent's Night on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2013. For Central Middle School, we distributed the survey and the kit during the Parent's Night on August 29<sup>th</sup>, 2013. For Hanshew Middle School, we distributed the survey and the kit during the Parent's Night on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and the Parent Teacher Conference on October 16<sup>th</sup> 2013. For Romig Middle School, we handed out the survey and the kit during the Parent's Night on September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2013 and Family Dinner Night on November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2013. At the end of the events, we collected the completed pre-test survey questionnaires.

From November 16<sup>th</sup>, 2013 to January 14<sup>th</sup>, 2014, we conducted our posttest via phone and email surveys with a representative sample of pretest survey participants.

### Data Entry and Analysis

We entered both pre- and post- test survey data on SPSS. Our analysis involved running frequencies for all of our variables and assessing the proportions, means, and standard deviations for two of our variables, specifically, the number of meals parents had with their children and the quality of their mealtime conversations. Paired t-test to assess whether there is significant between our pre and post-test results. Statistical significance was set at  $< 0.05$  p-value.

## RESULTS

### Participation Rate

A total of 683 parents participated in the pre-test survey. Of the total participants in the pre-test survey, we sampled 216 participants in post-test survey. If we consider the number of pre-test participants as our population, we have achieved a sample size that is representative of the population with 95% Confidence Interval and approximately 5.5% margin of error in our results. Results reported here is limited to the 216 that participated in both the pre-test and post-test survey. As can be seen in Table 1, most of our participants came from Hanshew and Begich, followed by Clark and Central. The least number of participants came from Romig, which already participated last academic year.

Table 1. Pre and Post Test participants from the five middle schools: Clark, Begich, Central, Hanshew, and Romig.

Middle School	Total Number of Pre-test Participants (Population)	Total Number Post-test Participants (Sample)	Percent Participation in Pre and Posttest
Clark	119	33	15.3%
Begich	209	73	33.8%
Central	98	25	11.6%
Hanshew	230	74	34.3%
Romig	27	11	5.1%
Total	683	216	100%

### Number Meals and Quality of Mealtime Conversations with Children

We compared the number of meals parents had with their children in the past week in the pre-test and then again in the post-test. Our data shows that the number of meals significantly increased from 7.03 meals per week in the pre-test to 7.80 meals per week in the post-test ( $p$ -value  $< 0.01$ ). Please see Table 2 for details.

We also compared the quality of mealtime conversations in the family both in the pre-test and post-test. With a score of 1 being poor quality and a score of 4 being very good quality, the average quality of mealtime conversation score increased from 3.33 in the pre-test to 3.38 in the post-test. With a  $p$ -value of 0.26, this increase was not statistically significant. Please see Table 2 for details.

Table 2. Pre and Post Test Results for Number of Meals with Children in the Past Week and Quality of Mealtime Conversations

	Pre-Test Mean ± Standard Deviation	Post-Test Mean ± Standard Deviation	P-level
Number of meals with children in the past week	7.03±3.62	7.80±3.64	0.006
Quality of mealtime conversation	3.33±0.66	3.38±0.64	0.26

Using the Conversation Starter Packet

In post- test survey, we asked the parents whether they used Conversation Starter packet. Approximately 90% said that they used the packet. Of the parents who used the packet, 42% used all of the documents provided, 17% used just the informational pages and “Navigating Teen Years” booklet, 13% used the convsation card and informational pages, 12% used only the informational pages, 9% used just the conversation card, and the rest are other combination of the documents provided in the Kit. For more details, please see Figure 1.

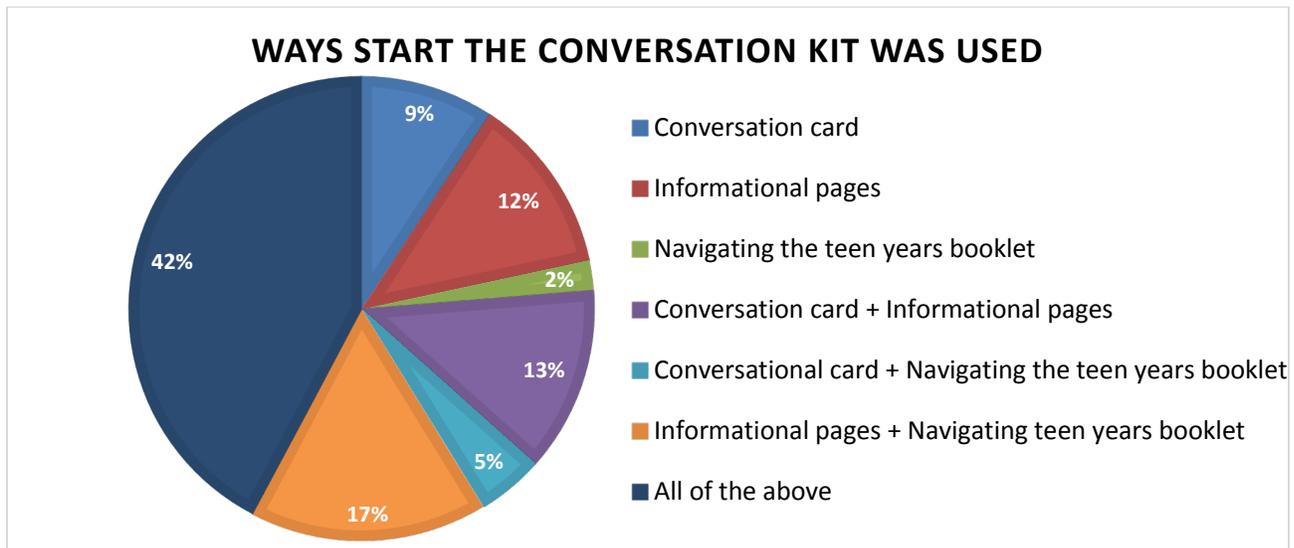


Figure1. Ways Start the Conversation Kit was used, N=194

Recommending the Start the Conversation Kit

More than 88% of the participant said that they would recommend the “Start the Conversation” project to other families. See Figure 2 below.

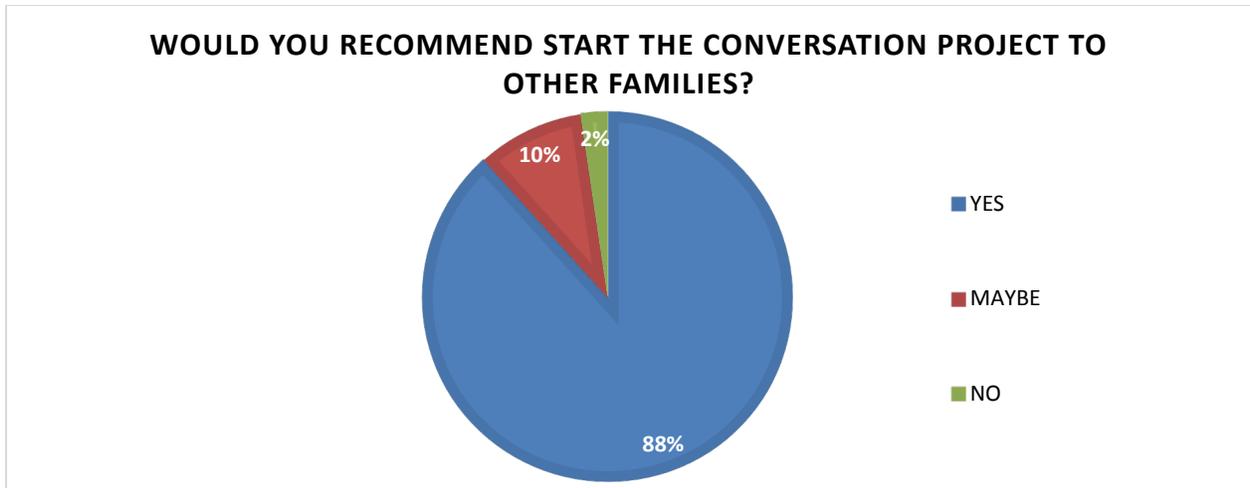


Figure 2. Would Parents Recommend the Start the Conversation Project to Other Families? N=214

#### Additional Comments about the "Start the Conversation"

A total of 132 participants provided comments regarding the "Start the Conversation" project. These comments gave positive feedbacks and suggestions for the future. These comments can be categorized into four themes. Approximately 23% of the comments revolved around the theme of the parents' positive experience with the Conversation Starter packet; 20% of the comments were on the theme of distributing the packets to more families; 21% of the comments revolved around the theme of helpfulness of the packet in their family; and 5% of the comments revolved around the theme of increased awareness of the importance of family meal.

A representative sample of quotes related to the theme of the parents' positive experience with the Conversation Starter packet are as follows:

- "We really enjoyed looking at the conversation cards, and they caused us to laugh and talk. They helped us, and now we have lots to talk about."
- "We have had a lot of fun using the kit and are still using it from time to time."
- I think the material was very good. We have a lot a really great conversations with our kids.
- It really opens up the conversation between parents and kids, and really opens up the floor for the kids to speak out as well. I have recommended this kit to other parents!
- We had a lot of fun. The cards were a great idea. When I would get home late the kids would be waiting at the table for me to take down the cards and use them with them.

The following is a representative sample of quotes on the theme of distributing Conversation Starter packets to more families are as follows:

- "I think it's great - especially for families who don't normally eat together and are looking to make a change."

- "It's a great campaign. It seems like something families have gotten away from these days. This campaign would be very helpful for young parents or new parents. We reviewed everything in the kit and have incorporated some of the questions and ideas into our dinner routine."
- "It's a very useful tool. Make it more well-known so more people can get involved."
- "It was great kit and tool for families. I think it would be very useful for families that are in trouble."
- "Send the Kit out to everyone! Don't just pass out the Kits at Open House. Every family should have the kit."

A representative sample of quotes on the theme of helpfulness of the Conversation Starter packets to their family are as follows:

- "The information you provided was very informative and was essential information for families."
- "It was very helpful with respect to starting conversations with teenagers. Teenagers are not always forthcoming with information, this really helped."
- "I thought it was fantastic. Sometimes you don't know what to say to your kids and this really helped started the conversation. We have kids from elementary school through high school and it sometimes hard to have conversations with all of them. This help me better understand how to talk to them and made much easier to talk with them. I would defiantly recommend this kit to other families."
- "We have great times together...made lots of memories. The kit was very informative on how to approach our children."
- "We have kids ranging from junior high and college. This kit was very helpful. We have used it multiple times. It had a lot of good tips and ideas in it that have been really useful to us. There were some great questions in it. Thank you for the kit I think every parent should receive it."

A representative sample of quotes on the theme of increased awareness of the importance of family meal are as follows:

- "Appreciate the initiative; a great awareness campaign. It makes you realize the importance of Family meals."
- "It is a great program for families who do not know about the importance of family meals. It reinforced that what we were doing mattered."
- "I think it was a good thing to make families aware of."
- "It was interesting and a cool way to let people know about how important family meals are."
- "I think it is a successful key for families. It was important for us and our kids to hear about. It was important for our daughter to hear about the importance of talking and dinner. I would love to see the school talk more about this with the students to get them coming up with topic to discuss at dinner. It would be helpful."

(A complete listing of the participant comments categorized by themes can be found in the Appendix.)

## DISCUSSION

Findings of this project show that providing the Conversation Starter packet can help increase the number of meals parents had with their children. The fact that there was no significant increase in the quality of mealtime conversation suggests that the quality of the mealtime conversations that are happening among the participants prior to receiving the packet are good to very good. Providing the packet to families seems to help reinforce the importance of having more mealtime conversations. Most of the parents that participated in the survey would recommend the Start the Conversation project to other families; they viewed the Conversation Starter packets as important and helpful in encouraging them to have more mealtime conversations with their children.

Based on the study findings, we have three recommendations. First, it is important to provide the Conversation Starter packets to parents who have not received them and perhaps expanding to other middle schools and even high schools. Secondly, we recommend that middle schools consider having parent workshops related to increasing and improving mealtime conversations with their children during parent-teacher conferences and/or meetings. Students, also, should receive lessons related to the importance of spending time and talking with parents during mealtime. Such lessons can be covered as part of their health education class. Finally, it is worth considering how to improve the Conversation Starter packets to be more culturally relevant. More than 90% of students in the Anchorage School District speak a language other than English. The Conversation Starter packet may not be helpful to families who have limited English proficiency. Moreover, conversation starters as recommended in the packet may be not necessarily be appropriate to parents and youth not raised in Western cultures.

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**APPENDIX**

Comments regarding the "Start the Conversation" Kit:

1. Quotes in the theme of the parents' positive experience with the kit are as follows:

- "We have had a lot of fun using the kit and are still using it from time to time. "
- "He enjoyed this kit. The cards were the primary tool utilized. This kit can only do well for families. Make it available to the public and keep this program going. "
- "I appreciate the time that you have put together. My kids like it as well as me. "
- "I liked it. It had a lot of great information. "
- "I liked the ideas presented in the Start the conversation cards. I found that my husband and I liked it more than the kids and tended to carry the conversation. Often our kids (girl age 16 and boy age 13) would take the conversation in a different direction. As long as we kept a congenial conversation going we were ok with the tangents. When the kids starts picking on each other or adding negative comments then they have to do the dishes! Over all Start the conversation is a good idea. One thing that has helped me increase conversations with my kids is to just stop and listen. If I ask too many questions that is a show stopper for them. If I am quiet, respectful and add sparse encouraging comments - I can't get them to shut up! "
- "I think it's a good thing. For me it's really comfortable to do this but some people don't have any experience. "
- "I think the material was very good. We have a lot a really great conversations with our kids. "
- "It really opens up the conversation between parents and kids, and really opens up the floor for the kids to speak out as well. I have recommended this kit to other parents! "
- "It was absolutely good idea. The questions on note cards needed to be directed more specifically for different age groups of kids. Because I have only teenagers, this was okay to me."
- "It's interesting and makes the family have more unity in the house. "
- "Loved the Conversation cards; they were great. It would be helpful to have card questions for elementary school students, too. "
- "Pretty good cards"
- "Really like the flip cards- our favorite. we keep them on the kitchen table. "
- "The cards are pretty awesome. Dad loves it. "
- "The cards were good ideas. I have lots of driving time with the kids so they are trapped and typically chat with me. "
- "The conversation cards made it very easy. We didn't use the folder but the cards were more accessible so we just keep them by the dinner table. "
- "The conversation cards were wonderful and we used them a lot. "
- "The conversation starter cards are a useful, good idea. Well executed. "
- "The kids really enjoyed the conversation cards and even use them on their own. "
- "Very interesting! It really helped make a conversation and it was relaxing. "
- "Very useful for the success of the kids. "

- "We had a lot of fun. The cards were a great idea. When I would get home late the kids would be waiting at the table for me to take down the cards and use them with them. "
- "We love it! Not many people take the time to sit down to eat and talk to each other. This stuff's important. "
- "We really enjoyed looking at the conversation cards, and they caused us to laugh and talk. They helped us, and now we have lots to talk about. "
- "We use the cards a lot. We actually take turns making up our own questions now too and pretending like they are on the cards. Our 4 year old loves it too. "
- "When we used it we took it to the restaurant and had fun with it. "
- "Would like more cards! We have the cards on table right now. "
- "We used the cards a couple of times and reviewed the informational pages after we got it. I think it's a great program and I hope you keep doing it at our school and expanded to other schools. "
- "We reviewed it after open house and used it couple of times. "
- "I liked the cards & we've put them near the table. We just haven't used them. We are a very talkative family, so don't really need a prompt. :) "

2. Quotes in the theme of suggestion to distribute the kits to more families are as follows:

- "I do think this is a good thing especially for families holding down multiple jobs. "
- "I highly recommend it. It's a good tool to get more involved with your kids. We use the Bible first then we use the conversation cards. "
- "I think it's great - especially for families who don't normally eat together and are looking to make a change. "
- "I think the conversation starters may be good for some families. Some of the ideas are things I think many families I know have discussed, but some are more novel. "
- "I would recommend this kits to other families it is outstanding. We are traveling to South Africa working with families there and would love to share the kit to them. This was really a great product and incredibly helpful we have used it multiple times. "
- "I shared this kit with my family (sister and brother) to use with their kids. We are working hard on having good nutrition and connecting. "
- "I shared with my coworker. I ask my daughter about school at dinner. "
- "It was great kit and tool for families. I think it would be very useful for families that are in trouble. "
- "It's a great campaign. It seems like something families have gotten away from these days. This campaign would be very helpful for young parents or new parents. We reviewed everything in the kit and have incorporated some of the questions and ideas into or dinner routine. "
- "Really good but we are already doing this. It would be best if lower-income family gets the kits."
- "Seemed like it was designed for people who don't know how to communicate with their kids. We looked at the kit but didn't use it much because we talk with our kids a lot already. "

- "This could be beneficial for other families who don't get that opportunity to have meals and conversations together. "
- "This kit is helpful for parents who do not know how to relate to their children. I am very involved with all aspects of my children lives and they are comfortable talking to me, probably more than they should be. But, for those parents who do not have that same comfort level with their kids, the packet will be useful. "
- "This supports what we are already doing and it really helps to have it. It think it would be great for other families. "
- "Used a couple of times, not a whole lot, because they already have dinner together. This would be useful to families who don't usually have dinner together. "
- "We already have be doing this. I like the ideas of the program. It would be good to family who don't seat together and not have conversation. "
- "I gave the kit back knowing I would have just thrown it away. I have always had an open and honest relationship with my kids. We have talked about their personal space to how to handle bullies. The kits are a good idea for those families who are not close. Just not for mine. "
- "Great idea for families who generally wouldn't think to use this method to connect with kids. "
- "Good program for people who don't have. "
- "I think it's great for families. "
- "Our procedure has always been family dinner, unless when our children were teenagers they became too busy. Even then we had dinner together a few times a week. We continued this when they grew up and left, and we continue it with our foster son. We did us the kit when we first obtained it, and keep the questions available. I think this kit is excellent for families just learning to start meal conversations. "
- "It's a very useful tool. Make it more well-known so more people can get involved. "
- "Kit for families who don't know how to do that is good. "
- "Send the Kit out to everyone! Don't just pass out the Kits at Open House. Every family should have the kit. "
- "We reviewed the kit a lot at first and opened things. It would be great to have all families receive this kit right at the start of the year as a mandatory program. "
- "It is a good idea for people that are busy. "

### 3. Quotes in the theme of helpfulness of the kits to their family are as follows:

- "I have split custody of my child so I don't get to eat with her often. It was helpful. "
- "I really liked it the cards they were great. The whole kit help a lot. "
- "I think the more you can promote to people to communication with their kids the better. I think it's a great idea and the information was useful. I only have partial custody of kids so I would like to eat more with them. "
- "I thought it was fantastic. Sometimes you don't know what to say to your kids and this really helped started the conversation. We have kids from elementary school through high school and it sometimes hard to have conversations with all of them. This help me better understand how

to talk to them and made much easier to talk with them. I would defiantly recommend this kit to other families. "

- "I thought it was really cool and helpful. "
- "It was a helpful reminder and very nicely put together. "
- "It was great kit. It helped. "
- "Helpful."
- "It was very helpful with respect to starting conversations with teenagers. Teenagers are not always forthcoming with information, this really helped. "
- "It was very helpful. "
- "It was very nice. It was helpful to be reminded. "
- "The cards are fun! I feel that they are most useful and informative part of the kit. I started carrying them in my purse. "
- "The cards were great! They really helped everyone participate in questions and answers around the dinner table. We hope everyone gets one of the kits. "
- "The conversation cards were pretty informative and had good suggestions for starting conversation. "
- "The information given in the kit was very helpful. "
- "The information in the kit was helpful. I looked at it after open house. "
- "The information you provided was very informative and was essential information for families."
- "The kit was very informative. It helps to know this stuff. "
- "The questions were good and the information was very helpful. "
- "This was such an amazing campaign and a great reminder for families. I really liked all the materials. They were really informative. "
- "We have a few things going on with our family that makes it hard to connect. I reviewed the information in the kit after open house and it had some useful ideas in it. My kids do a lot of sports and other things. "
- "We have great times together...made lots of memories. The kit was very informative on how to approach our children. "
- "We have kids ranging from junior high and college. This kit was very helpful. We have used it multiple times. It had a lot of good tips and ideas in it that have been really useful to us. There were some great questions in it. Thank you for the kit I think every parent should receive it. "
- "We read all the material and used the cards once. It was helpful information. "
- "We used the kit a few times and it was extremely helpful. I actually just took the kit out last week and was re-reading the information in. I plan on passing it to my sister. It was really helpful to have the cards on the ring. We keep them on the counter next to school supplies and our niece looked at them and started asking us questions. This was great kit and I would recommend it others. "
- "Great resource. "
- "Great kit with a lot of good information. It was useful. "
- "I think is really good and promote talking more. "

4. Quotes in the theme of increased awareness of the importance of family meal are as follows:

- "Appreciate the initiative; a great awareness campaign. It makes you realize the importance of Family meals. "
- "It is a great program for families who do not know about the importance of family meals. It reinforced that what we were doing mattered. "
- "I think it was a good thing to make families aware of. "
- "It was interesting and a cool way to let people know about how important family meals are. nice reminder."
- "I think it's great especially for middle school families. "
- "I think it is a successful key for families. It was important for us and our kids to hear about. It was important for our daughter to hear about the importance of talking and dinner. I would love to see the school talk more about this with the students to get them coming up with topic to discuss at dinner. It would be helpful. "

5. More quotes from parents:

- "It had a lot of good information. "
- "Good idea"
- "I think this should be made available for high school students as well. "
- "It was fun at first, but we ran out of questions. My kids just wanted to talk about boys and there were no conversation cards about dating. "
- "It was great idea for the school's open house as a way to get families connecting together. "
- "It was good kit, but I have no time to use and look it carefully. "
- "It was good to get. "
- "It is a great idea. "
- "It was just good. "
- "It was really good information. "
- "It was very good. I like it. "
- "Kit could be used for children outside home. Booklets at schools etc. "
- "Looked at it a little while after receiving the kit. We normally ask a lot of questions. "
- "More topics on the conversation cards. Maybe a bit realistic or real world based questions. "
- "Nice"
- "No. It was well done. Thank you! "
- "Overall it's a really good idea! "
- "Parents should show restraint with technology. I will see a family sit down in a restaurant and each member has their own device out -- no one is talking to anyone else at the table. I see a parent pushing their child in a stroller and they are on their cell phone at the same time. It's not just at meal times, but electronics appears to be taking first place over in person face time. Sometimes conversations about what happened "today" really flop but current events or something not so personal will for a connection to bridge into personal chatter. "

- "Provide an incentive like a contest for a \$10 gift card (include a page in the kit that parents have to turn back in to enter in the contest). "
- "Questions are great but we always ask questions."
- "Second go around with raising teens - don't feel it's necessary for someone like herself but good for younger/newer parents. "
- "We didn't really get a chance to use it that much. "
- "We feel we had good conversations before receiving the kit. We looked through the conversation cards and talked about the suggestions and had some fun with that, but didn't need them to get talking. We are a very fortunate family. At this point we talk with our teen a lot and she is very open. We hope as she ages, she will continue to talk with us. I think some families may need a tool like the card kit and it could be very helpful. It is so individual, family to family. "
- "We look forward to using the cards when our introverted son comes home from college over the holidays. "
- "We looked over the material after open house. It's useful information. "
- "We think it is great you are taking the time to do this in our school!"
- "We used its some but we were already doing a lot of this."
- "I think I would have used the cards, but we already had a lot of things to discuss as a family. We look at the Science for Kids together and discuss current events, etc. For example this past week Nelson Mandela passed away and we talked about his imprisonment and his efforts to bring freedom to black South Africans. We talk about relationships too because our child is 13 and interested in girls. We talk about his goals for education and how to achieve them. He also wants a ford mustang which lends itself to financial discussions, how much money he needs to purchase the car and how much it costs to maintain and drive and insure a vehicle. These are the things we discussed this week."
- "I put the conversation cards in my kitchen drawer. We make the cards accessible so that we can use them. That's the important part."
- "I don't think the family is teaching families how to talk I think it is."
- "It has a really good relationship and doesn't see a need to use the kit."
- "Great idea. Great job."
- "Great idea."
- "Didn't use the cards but did look at some of the informational sheets in the packet when she received the kit."
- "It might be helpful if there was a way to make it an online application... Too much paper."
- "Awesome. It is very nice at the school."