

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Having Family Conversations

Promoting the Life Skill of Communicating in Preschoolers

Seven Strategies that Work in Moving from Managing Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: I have heard that it's very important to have dinner together as a family, so that we can have time for family conversations. Unfortunately, in my family, it is rare that we are all home for dinner at the same time. What are some other ideas for family conversations outside of dinnertime?

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University says that adults can promote talking together in everyday ways: "It's through conversations, it's through questioning, it's [through] being responsive to what a child is interested in."

There are many simple and fun things you can do—wherever you are—to have family conversations. These activities will also help your child develop the life skill of Communicating.

1. Use everyday moments. Every experiences you have together provide an opportunity to talk together.

- What are the times that a few—if not all—of you are together as a family? Is it breakfast? Sunday morning? Trips to run errands? Shopping? Use whatever moments you have together to talk. Even if it is just two of you, these conversations are important.
- Think of those in-between moments as times to talk. For example, studies show that children are more likely to ask questions when there is time to reflect, like riding in the car. Take advantage of times like this to encourage your child to share with you what's on his or her mind.

Susan Goldin-Meadow of the University of Chicago has found that talking without words—using gestures and touch—are crucial to Communicating. She says: "I like to say that children enter language hands first!"

2. Use touch and facial expressions. Sometimes you or your child may not feel like talking. There are many other nonverbal ways to communicate with your child.

- Be aware of your facial expressions. Make an effort to smile or wink at your child.
- Come up with a special gesture with your child that only the two of you know and use it to connect with each other without words.
- Make sure to give hugs or pats on the back or a soft squeeze on the arm to let your child know you are there and you love him or her.

Sometimes these small actions are just what's needed to communicate your love and positive feelings to your child, especially as he or she grows older and is less likely to sit on your lap or hold your hand.

In a study designed to identify the ingredients of "quality" conversations (the kind of conversations that promote literacy and communication skills), researchers Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University, Roberta

Golinkoff of the University of Delaware, Lauren Adamson of Georgia State University and their colleagues found that three things are especially important: 1) being engaged together; 2) having rituals and traditions; and 3) keeping the conversation going.

3. Talk about things you care about. If the conversation is one that your child begins, pay attention and listen. If you start the conversation, make sure that it is something that you care about, such as telling stories.

- Share your stories. You can help your child develop the life skill of Communicating by telling stories about your life and asking your child to tell stories about his or hers. Stories are what bind us together; they are what tell us that we are part of a family or community. They convey our traditions and our favorite memories. Family stories are often connected in our experience with laughter or other emotions and, thus, become more strongly embedded in our memories.

4. Create family traditions around talking together. You can start a tradition while in the car, before bed or anytime you are usually together, by using conversation starters that everyone, including you, answers. For example:

- “What was best thing that happened today?”
- “What was the worst thing that happened today?”
- “What are you most excited about today?”

You can also start conversations with other prompts like,

- “Once upon a time ...”
- “If I had one dream come true, it would be ...”

Let your child have a turn at choosing the questions and prompts.

5. Keep the conversation going. The best conversations and interactions involve what researchers call “serve and return”—you or your child does something (serves) and the other responds (returns), back and forth, back and forth like a game of ball. Researchers call these conversations “fluid and connected,” meaning that the ideas being discussed build on each other.

- You can play a game with your child called Ping Pong. The goal of the game is to keep the back and forth conversation going for a determined amount of time (a few minutes) without “dropping the ball.” Use a real ball if you need to. You or your child can pick a topic to talk about. This game offers great practice in Communicating and is lots of fun.

In a study of the role of families in children’s literacy and language development, Catherine Snow, a renowned expert on language development and professor at Harvard Graduate School of Education, notes: “[F]amilies that used words ... that children might not use [and] probably don’t understand fully ... had children with much larger vocabularies two years later.”

6. Use rich and diverse language. Children learn words from listening to and watching adults. When you model rich language, you are helping expose your child to the joy of language. Use new words as well as familiar words in new ways.

7. Play word games. Word games make language fun and contribute to your child’s “phonemic awareness,” or his understanding of the sounds of letters. Games like these also encourage conversation and introduce new vocabulary. After all, as Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, Roberta Golinkoff and their colleagues say: “Learning takes place best when young children are engaged and enjoying themselves.”

- Play rhyming games or try tongue twisters.
- Learn new words together with the Dictionary Game. One of you picks a letter and then you both find words in the dictionary that you don’t normally use. Then give the other person a turn.
- Play the Definition Guessing Game where one of you chooses a word and the other guesses the definition. Then check the answer in a dictionary. Were you right or wrong?

These seven strategies will promote the life skill of Communicating and help you move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Communicating involves much more than understanding language, speaking, reading and writing—it is the skill of determining what one wants to communicate and realizing how our communications will be understood by others. It is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children’s learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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