

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

My Child Talks Non Stop

Promoting the Life Skill of Communicating in Preschoolers

Five Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

Question: My five year old talks non stop. He talks so much that we have started to tune him out and sometimes even ask him to be quiet for a few minutes. How I can encourage him to communicate without talking all the time?

While as a parent you want to encourage your child to express himself and strengthen his communication skills, it is important to find a balance between listening and talking. By promoting the life skill of Communicating, you can help your child interact with others effectively while learning how to pay attention to how much he talks in conversations.

Jack P. Shonkoff of Harvard University says:

There is no development without relationships.

1. Engage your child in back and forth interactions. Conversations are not just one-sided. Help your child understand this by promoting what child development researchers call “serve and return”—you or your child does something (serves) and the other responds (returns), back and forth, like a game of ball. Jack P. Shonkoff of Harvard University elaborates:

Look for serves—initiation of opportunities to interact—and return them—with age- appropriate responses like smiles, words, pointing, play, cuddles or conversation.

- Have conversations without words. Make a silly face and see how your child responds. Imitate the face he makes back to him and keep this game going back and forth. You can also try copying each other's movements and sounds. This gives your child practice in watching you and responding to what you do.
- Help your child practice back and forth conversations with words at home. One idea is to take turns speaking at mealtime. Let your child know that everyone will have a chance to speak. Remind him that his job is to be a listener while others are talking. You can even set a timer so your child clearly understands when the turns are over.

2. Offer your child opportunities to communicate in different forms. Encourage your child to explore expressing his ideas and feelings in ways other than speaking, like art, music, movement or storytelling.

- You can create stories with your child by coming up with a sentence like: “Once upon a time, there was a ...” Ask your child to fill in the blank. Then you can each take a turn adding a sentence to the story.
- Make up songs together. Take a familiar tune, like “Row Your Boat” and add your own words to it. You can describe what you are doing like “Walk, walk down the stairs, down the stairs we go, walk walk down the stairs, walking very slow.” Ask your child for ideas of words, songs and rhymes to use.
- When your child has a lot to say, ask him to draw or paint a picture about what he is trying to tell you. This will help him take the time to slow down and think more clearly about what he really wants to say. Then ask him to tell you about what he made and write down his words. Read his words back to him and ask him if this was what he wanted to say.

Adele Diamond of the University of British Columbia describes what preschool-aged children are like when they each have a story to tell (and this can continue beyond the preschool years):

The typical scenario is that nobody wants to listen—everybody wants to tell his or her story. If you ask a four year old to wait, you might as well save your breath.

Diamond has been a pioneer in studying what scientists call the Executive Functions of the brain. Communicating involves life skills that promote Executive Functions like Focus and Self Control. Diamond goes on to explain a tool that some teachers use to help the children in their classrooms develop better listening skills and strengthen the life skill of Focus and Self Control:

What they do is they give one child a picture of a mouth and the other child a picture of an ear, and they explain that “ears don’t talk, ears listen.” With that concrete reminder in front of them, the child [holding the ear picture] listens—[even] the child who would never have listened otherwise. After a few months, the pictures aren’t needed anymore. The children have internalized them—and the behaviors they represent.

3. Promote your child’s listening skills. Communicating is just as much about being able to listen as it is about being able to express yourself. It requires focus, memory and self control to think about what to say and how to say it. Listening also involves being able to take the perspective of another person in order to understand his or her point of view and respond appropriately. Model and encourage reflective listening in everyday moments:

- Listen to your child and let him know what his behavior is telling you: “You seem so excited to tell me about your friend’s birthday party. Let’s sit down together so I can listen. Take a deep breath and think about what you want to say.”
- Don’t be dismissive of your child’s thoughts or opinions. Adele Diamond of the University of British Columbia says: “The most powerful way to communicate to our children that we care about them is to listen to them. Truly listen. Give them our time and attention. The quality of our listening rather than the wisdom of our words is often what has the most impact.”
- Encourage your child to be an active listener by asking him to fill in the blanks of a familiar song or story. Pretend to make a mistake, like singing “Twinkle Twinkle little shoe,” and see if your child catches it.
- Come up with a signal that will help remind your child to take a step back from the conversation and think about what he wants to say before speaking. You can try a gentle touch on the shoulder or a special hand gesture to let your child know he should take a turn being a listener.

4. Set aside a quiet time every day. Find a time that works for your family and make it a special time to engage in calm and quiet activities. Turn off the television and the computer, and don’t answer the phone, even for just ten minutes. Encourage your child to use this time to read or draw. You might also want to try yoga poses or deep breathing together to help slow down both of your minds and enjoy the peace and quiet.

Adele Diamond of the University of British Columbia talks about inhibitory control, also referred to as effortful control. Inhibition is crucial in social relationships and communicating. Diamond defines inhibitory control as “the ability to resist a strong inclination to do one thing and instead do what is most appropriate.”

5. Encourage Focus and Self Control in fun ways. Since the life skill of Focus and Self Control is such a big part of Communicating, practice these skills every day in playful ways. You don’t need to “teach” these skills to your child or buy any expensive toys or games. You can try:

- Guessing games like “I Spy” that encourage your child to listen closely, make sense of what he is hearing and respond appropriately.
- “Red Light/Green Light” or “Simon Says” are all games that encourage your child to think on his feet and use his self control to change his behavior according to different rules. You can make it even harder by asking your child to do the opposite. For example, when playing “Red Light/Green Light,” ask your child to move when you say “Red” and stop when you say “Green.”

- Play games that encourage turn-taking. Playing card games or board games are great opportunities for reinforcing this fundamental piece of Communicating. These games also support your child’s development of the life skill of Focus and Self Control to manage his behavior while he waits for his turn. You’ll most likely have to remind your child to be patient several times before he gets the hang of it.

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

Communicating is 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.

Prescriptions for Learning were created with funding from the Popplestone Foundation.

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