

SKILL BUILDING OPPORTUNITIES

Having Family Conversations

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?

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.

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.

1

Use touch and facial expressions.

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!"

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.

2

Share stories and use rich and diverse language.

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.

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

3

Create family traditions around talking together.

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.

You can start a tradition during a time 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.

4

Keep the conversation going.

The best conversations and interactions involve taking turns—you or your child does something and the other responds, back and forth, taking turns. 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.

5

Play word games.

Word games make language fun and contribute to your child’s “phonemic awareness,” or their 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?