

How does one naturally help a young child to start learning the art of conversation? **Jeremy Clarke** gives some pointers.

From talk to conversation



Talking with your children is an entirely natural process that almost every parent will engage in with their child. So why do we even need to think about it? If it is something that happens in every family then every child is experiencing conversation, but it would be foolish to assume all of those conversations are of the same quality. It would certainly be true that some parents do talk more than others and that some conversations are far more beneficial to the child than others, and this article will begin to explore why this may be.

Reflecting on interactions that I have with my own children I realise that often our initial talking does not really develop. Now this is fine, and the normal day would be hard to manage if every time someone spoke we made a conversation out of it, but it did get me thinking about when conversations happen with my children, and why. I chose my words carefully there – I did not say ‘when I have conversations’ but ‘when conversations happen’. The reason for this is that anyone can start the conversation, a child or adult. The reason for mentioning this, admittedly a fairly obvious statement, is that it

Acting out a conversation is a great way to practice for children

day?’ This is, of course, a completely unreasonable question to ask any four year old child. She has been there for nearly seven hours, done a myriad of activities, developed more in a day than I could imagine, and I am asking her to not only recall all of it, but sum it up for me in one or two sentences. So why did I ask it? The answer is probably as simple as ‘habit’. That is what I would say to an adult, and I have not thought about what it would mean to a child. My aim was to get information from her so I would know that she was happy at school, so when she replies ‘Fine’ I continue to question her until I am

Think about the last time you spoke to a child. What did you say to them? Did you ask a question, or give a direction? Did you praise something they had done, or reply to a query of their own?

A good conversation will bring differing rewards for the adult and the child. For the adult, spending time talking could increase the bond with their child through both contact time and an increased knowledge about them. For the child who is being listened to the sense of worth and acceptance will be building up, as will the idea that families communicate – an invaluable belief to hold when they enter their teenage years.

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means the initial aim of the conversation will be different. I may not be able to work out my children’s aims but I am aware of my own, and as an adult I should be aware of my motives during a conversation. It doesn’t matter what your aim is, as long as you are aware that you have one and that may alter the direction of the conversation from its natural path as you attempt to meet your own needs. The aim of the child could be driven by the human tendency for gregariousness – to interact with others, whereas the adult aim could well be to build the relationship and ensure the child is safe.

For example, with my four year old who has recently started at school full time, I will often ask ‘How was your

satisfied that she has in fact had a good day. My motives for the conversation make me steer it in the direction of my daughter confirming that she played with friends, did some activities and ate some food. I may well have met my emotional needs, but what does my daughter make of that? Does she think she has to report to me every day about what went on? Her role in that conversation is almost entirely passive, just responding to me – it is not a good quality interaction for her.

After reflecting on my word choice I did two things. First, I quite quickly remembered that children often take a different meaning from a question that the one intended by the person who asks it. This can be a result of having a

more limited vocabulary than the adult, and from having less experience at working out what is meant by a question. It is true to say that for young children the responses you will get from 'why did you do that?' would not be as accurate as responses to 'what happened?' as explaining facts is much easier than explaining feelings that may not even be fully understood at this age.

The second thing I did was to begin to talk about my day without asking her about hers. By doing this I am modelling how someone would share information without any pressure on her to do the same. If she chooses, she is able to take what I have said as a template and build on it from her own memories, or she may talk about something else entirely. This would then become a conversation without agenda, and will be a far more natural experience for her.

In our house we find that tea-time is ideal for catching up with each other. We have begun to move on from asking just 'how was your day' to telling each other about our days, and then asking questions. If this sounds like we operate like a formal interview around the



"Where would you like to go? How can we get there?" These questions can allow the child to express themselves naturally

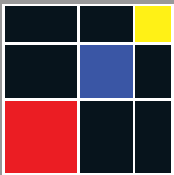
dining table I would say that it is far more relaxed than it sounds. The fact that we are all eating can give the children time to absorb the question and consider what the response will be, or to think of a question of their own. We also ask questions that guide thinking but are still open to interpretation – for example I would ask "Who has made you laugh today?" or "What happened that you would like to do again?" These questions help her remember specific events, rather than try to sum up the day. These are also the type of questions that she will mirror when asking them to the rest of the family. I have found that when asking

"What have you done today?" the answer is very often something that has happened in the last ten minutes, or on occasion has been "Talked to you at the table!"

As conversations are modelled and practiced they will come from the child more often, and more naturally. This is joyful for the adult as the agenda for the conversation is coming from the child, and it allows for whoever is sharing the moment to gain insights into the child's understanding of the world that may not have otherwise been possible.

Of course, I must mention the most wonderful reason for conversations with your children – they can be very funny. Comments from either the adult or the child can be the source of great joy, and the more fun a child has talking with you, the more they will want to do it again. If you make time for a chat, let the child lead the agenda and talk without any pressure to answer questions, and then you can be confident that you are both learning together.

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