

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Self Expression

Promoting the Life Skill of Communicating in School Age Children

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

Question: My son rarely shares how he feels about something. In fact, he rarely has an opinion about anything. How can I help him express himself and develop his ideas?

As he continues to grow and mature, your child is in the process of discovering who he is and what he really thinks about this. It takes time and will continue to change as he has new experiences and meets new people. You can help your child develop his ability to express his ideas confidently by promoting the life skill of Communicating.

In an observational study of 42 diverse parents and children by Betty Hart and Todd R. Risely that begin when the children were nine months of age and continued through 36 months, the researchers found that parents use two different types of language when they talk with their children. One is business talk that expresses the adult's needs, like: "Stop that," "Do this" or "Come here." The other type is extra talk, where parents talk about "what if," "remember" and "what do you think," or use other words that respond to and build on what their children are doing or saying. Extra talk has been found to make a positive difference in children's academic success.

- 1. Have conversations that go beyond "yes/no" questions.** You can build on your child's experiences by having discussions that encourage your child to say more than "yes" or "no," like: "Did you have fun at school?" When you encourage your child to take small steps toward expressing himself in a comfortable setting with you, you are supporting his communication skills and making them stronger.
 - Ask lots of open-ended questions. Researchers call these "wh" questions: why, what, who or where questions. These questions ask your child to go beyond "just the facts" and think more deeply. Instead of asking: "Did you like your lunch today?" try asking: "What was your favorite part of lunch? Who had the best/worst lunch?"
- 2. Tune in to your child. Listen and be responsive.** Your child is more likely to share his thoughts and feelings with you when he feels like you really care about what he has to say. Part of being responsive includes knowing when your child may just want to take some quiet time for himself and not talk.
 - Give your child examples of how to confidently express thoughts and feelings. Let him know that it is okay to have a different opinion than someone else: "My friend at work really liked the movie we saw together, and I didn't. We had a great discussion later about it."
 - Repeat what your child says back to him, so he gets an idea of how his words are coming across: "So what you seem to be saying is that you have fun playing soccer at recess, but you really don't want to play goalie anymore. Is that it?"

Michael Gazzaniga of the University of California at Santa Barbara describes the findings of the Dana Foundation's 2008 report on learning, arts and the brain:

There is growing evidence that learning of the arts—whether it be music, dance, drama, painting—has a positive impact on cognitive life.

- 3. Encourage your child to express himself in many different ways.** Catherine Snow of Harvard Graduate School of Education calls for encouraging children to use many different forms of self-expression. Painting, drawing, music and dance are all great ways for your child to express his ideas, with and without words.

- Ask your child to write or tell you a story about something he does or someone he knows. Then read it out loud or repeat it back to him. Ask him if it sounds like what he was thinking or trying to say. Encourage him to think about how other people in his life might respond to the story.

Janellen Huttenlocher of the University of Chicago summarizes much of the research on communication skills when she says:

It's very important that language be embedded in a positive environment where everybody is thrilled—not about learning language per se—but learning something [they care about].

- 4. Make it fun.** When you encourage your child to discuss his thoughts and feelings in a casual and fun way, he can develop confidence in his opinions without feeling judged or embarrassed. The following games are great ways to connect with your child and get him thinking and talking:
- **“What Would You Do If...?”** Take turns coming up with answers for imaginary situations like “What would you do if you were king for a day?”
 - **“Best Thing/Worst Thing:”** Tell your child the best and worst things about your day. Then ask him to share his best and worst moments. Dinner, bedtime, or riding in the car are great opportunities for this kind of casual reflection.
 - **“Three Wishes:”** Share what you would ask for if you had three wishes and why. Then ask your child for his wishes. This should help you see some of the things your child might be thinking about. From there, you can ask him to tell you more.
 - **“Story Shares:”** Create your own family tradition by sharing stories from your life and encouraging your child to tell his own. You can also come up with original stories by giving prompts like: “Once upon a time there was a ...” and taking turns adding on.

Study after study finds that reading with children is a powerful force in their lives and leads to better communication skills. In the words of Catherine Snow of Harvard University, “[A] book creates a platform on which the conversation takes place.”

- 5. Use books or television as conversation starters.** Books and television often cause some kind of emotional response and are good opportunities for sparking focused conversations between you and your child. Some things you can do are:
- Start a family book club. Ask your child to choose a book for the family to read. Set a date to discuss the book and ask questions like “What was your favorite part or character and why?”
 - You can also set aside time for a family movie night. Everyone can choose a different movie and explain to the others why their movie should be the winner. Then take a vote and watch the winner’s choice. You can set up a schedule to watch the other movies or choose new movies another time.
 - Help your child think about effective communication by asking questions as you read or watch television shows and commercials. Encourage him to think about the message the writers are trying to get across. Does he understand what that message is? How does it make him feel?

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.

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