On Parenting

10 ways to help your child be a good conversationalist

By Sarah Hamaker April 9

From the time our children are born, we have been told how important it is to talk to and with them. But no one told us how hard that would be in reality. On the one hand, we love their enthusiasm for the things that capture their interest, but for the love of Pete, we can’t take another endless recitation about dinosaurs, Frozen or how to play the game Treasure Island from P.E. class.

Sometimes, the cold hard truth is that talking with our children can be an exercise in forbearance, what with the mundane topics and endless repetitions. But all is not lost! There is hope for intelligent, thoughtful, and—dare I say it?—interesting conversations with our children. The key is teaching our children what makes a good conversationalist. “We need to teach kids of all ages that conversation is give-and-take, with responsibilities for both participants,” says Betsy Dill, a creative writing teacher in Centreville, Va.

The basics, such as not interrupting and saying please and thank you, lay the foundation upon which we add the softer skills that help our children turn into people with whom conversing is a pleasure. “How to have a meaningful, impactful conversation is so necessary or any social
setting,” says Rebecca Czarniecki, who teaches manners to children through Tea With Mrs. B in Falls Church, Va.

While those skills don’t come naturally to most kids, they can be taught. Here are 10 ways we can guide our children to becoming better conversationalists.

1. Talk to your children. If you don’t have conversations with your children, you can’t teach them how to have that interaction. “Talk to your child at every opportunity about everything and anything,” says Judith Hervay of Reston, Va., a mother of two girls now 17 and 21. “Adults should always have time to sit down and talk with their child, to show them by doing how to hold a conversation.”

2. Practice active listening. Sometimes, a child will act bored around another sibling or friend who is talking about a topic that doesn’t interest her, and yet will expect rapt concentration when she has the floor. “Active listening is paying attention to what the other person is saying without planning what you’re going to say or thinking about something else,” says Dill. Body language plays a huge part of active listening, so role play with your child what being interested looks like, such as facial expressions and verbal sounds (sighing, etc.).

3. Cut to the chase. Children, especially young ones, have a hard time figuring out what the main point of a story is, so they tend to flood their recitations with all the facts. “You don’t have to give a blow-by-blow description of the story because that puts people to sleep,” says Dill. “Instead, you need to get to the main point pretty fast or you’ll lose the other person’s interest.” Ask questions that can help a child figure out the nugget worth sharing, including what they liked most about an event, what their favorite part was, what struck them as funny or weird.

4. Take a breath. Learning when to pause in a conversation is just as important as learning when to speak. “People today use so many filler words to monopolize air space,” says Czarniecki. “We should instead use ‘real’ words and not be afraid of silence.” She recommends repeating the question or saying “Let me think about it,” instead of immediately launching into a response if you need time to craft your answer.

5. Learn, learn, learn. “You can’t have a conversation if you don’t know anything about anything,” says Hervay. “To have a rich, intellectually rewarding and empathic conversation, you really should know things about the world.” Reading age-appropriate books, visiting museums and taking up hobbies are just some ways for kids to enrich their minds—and give them something to talk about.

6. Develop questions. “The basic foundation to any conversation is having a subject,” says
Czarniecki. "And one great way for kids to find that subject is to ask a question of their conversation partner." She suggests writing down questions and putting them in a bowl to be used at the table for conversation starters.

7. **Develop empathy.** "What makes someone good at conversation? Putting one’s self in the other person’s place," says Hervey. Empathy allows us to put ourselves in the other person’s shoes. "A person, no matter how incredibly brilliant they are, will be bored if they don’t have empathy because they won’t be interested in the other person," she says.

8. **Value silence.** Staying quiet can be very hard for many children, but parents should encourage their kids to not talk sometimes. We should help our children realize that just because they have something to say, doesn’t mean they always have to say it. “Silence is a lost art, but it’s a necessary part of any conversation,” adds Czarniecki.

9. **Be polite.** Sometimes we know more about a subject than the other person, and the temptation to point that out can be great. Other times, we don’t find the topic exciting or of interest to us. "I always told my girls to not make the other person feel dumb or ignorant or inadequate in those situations," says Hervey. “This is really hard for young kids, who want to rub it in that they know something the other person doesn’t, but it’s a great life lesson to learn.”

10. **Practice.** Conversing is a back-and-forth exchange—not a monologue or a lecture. One fun way to practice the give and take of conversation with kids is by tossing a small ball or water balloon. Toss it to the other person and ask a question, then the other person answers the question and tosses it back. “That helps children visually see the art of giving and receiving in conversation," says Czarniecki.

Talking with our children should be enjoyable for us and for them. By providing guidance for our kids on how this works in real life, we can help them develop into good conversationalists. "People can be so interesting, and children need to learn that any person from 90 to 9 has something interesting to contribute," says Hervey. “As parents, one of our jobs is to foster this curiosity and tell them that every human being matters.”

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