

Maxwell King: Preschool Education: Talking is Teaching

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A phenomenon of our age is the degree to which some middle-class parents have become increasingly frantic about getting their offspring off to a strong start in the intense world of learning. Once the province of higher education (Can Johnny get into Princeton? At how young an age should we have him registered for admission and start making those donations?), this anxiety has filtered down now through the pre-school world to the pre-school world.

In many large metropolitan areas in the United States today, some parents are pre-registering their children before birth at highly competitive pre-schools. What's more, many of them may not even be able to get in. It is that competitive. Parents with children barely a month old are also confronted with bold marketing claims about educational products that purport to make children smarter or learn faster from an array of companies with names like Baby Einstein, Your Baby Can Read, FatBrain Toys, and Little Smarties Educational Toys.

For families at lower income levels, with less education and far fewer resources, it can sometimes seem like such a cutthroat world that there is little prospect of their children finding a way through the maze to the best education. In fact, it can be so complicated and expensive, with pre-schools and electronic toys and "developmental videos," that a certain hopelessness sets in.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if -- for lower-demographic parents and, for that matter, all parents -- there were an affordable, effective strategy that could help launch children into learning at the youngest ages?

Well, in a way, there is: talking.

Fifteen years ago, Betty Hart and Todd Risley from the University of Kansas published the definitive study about the importance of talking to children (*Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Lives of Young American Children*, Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 1995). Their study demonstrated in a powerful way to the education community in America that there are enormous gaps in the amounts of talk heard by children in professional, working-class, and welfare families. Hart and Risley found that by the age of 4, "an average child in a professional family would have accumulated experience with almost 45 million words, an average child in a working-class family would have accumulated experience with 26 million words, and an average child in a welfare family would have accumulated experience with 13 million words."

Moreover, the kinds of talk heard in taciturn families differ substantially from what is heard in talkative families. Taciturn parents tend to do more "business talk": simple, effective communication to get what is needed in the here and now (e.g., "Stop that." "Let me see your clothes." "Come here."). It is often less supportive, more prohibitive, and negative.

By contrast, talkative parents communicate with their children about more than immediate business. They talk more frequently about "what-ifs," asking children to remember the past, or to speculate on the future. They have more varied conversations with children, taking extra turns to respond to what the child does or says and elaborating on it. Taking extra turns for positive talk with a child serves as an important affirmation of the child's value as a conversational partner.

Perhaps the most compelling finding in the Hart and Risley research is the extraordinary importance of an early start in literacy and learning. The gap between language development and the capacity to learn is so entrenched by the time young children get to school that even very expensive remedial programs to help at-risk children make up the difference are only partly successful. And, all too often, they aren't available. It seems impossible that the divide could be cast so dramatically and so definitively at such an early age, but the research tells us it is.

It is not, of course, quite that simple. There are parents in low-education, low-income homes who talk frequently and in positive ways with their children, just as there are parents in high-education, high-income homes who spend little or no time in positive interaction and talk. Still, the gap in talk between high- and low-income families is a major issue.

Talking to very young children might not be the only answer for disadvantaged parents, but there is increasing evidence that it is one of the most effective ways to make an early difference in social, emotional, and cognitive development. Talking -- lots of supportive, helpful talking -- literally is teaching. And most often -- particularly from birth to age 3 -- it is up to parents to create this language-rich environment.

Promoting language-rich experiences for young children is not a new idea. Researchers and educators have recommended shared book-reading, also known as dialogic reading, between adults and children as one of the best strategies for vocabulary development and rich language interactions. Dialogic reading requires adults to listen to children, to ask questions, to extend and expand on children's responses, and generally to be active participants in a reading experience.

Dialogic reading is important not just because it develops the foundational literacy skills for reading and academic achievement throughout a child's life, but also because it is an accessible, ongoing opportunity for parents and children to engage in positive interactions that support social and emotional development. The message is out: Parents across the country, from all backgrounds, understand the importance of reading to children.

But we need to expand our conceptions of dialogic reading to include the everyday interactions and experiences of young children. The talk that occurs in the course of regular activities (e.g., doing laundry, cooking, walking the dog, watching television) can be every bit as important as the talk that occurs while reading a story. Simply put, we should promote "dialogic living." This concept should extend beyond parents to all those who care for young children -- early learning teachers, home-based caregivers, baby-sitters, and grandparents.

Without dialogic living that centers on rich, positive, and consistent talk, very young children almost surely will not make a strong start toward emotional engagement and early literacy. And early literacy is, perhaps, the single best predictor of later success in school, college, and life.

At the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media in western Pennsylvania, school district partners working with the Center report that experienced kindergarten teachers can predict with unerring accuracy which young children will drop out of high school. The early deficit in their social, emotional, and cognitive development sets the stage for the rest of their lives and they are unable to make up the difference.

At a time when the public debate in the United States is riveted on the importance of fixing our underperforming education system, this simple truth -- that helping lower-demographic parents understand the value of talking -- may be as central to educational improvement as any other single move our society could make. As Hart and Risley and other researchers have shown, early talk plays a major role in language and vocabulary development, which has a dramatic impact on literacy, which in turn is a major predictor of long-term academic and professional success. The links in this long, continuous chain of learning and development start to form at the very beginning of children's lives.

This has never been more important than today, when the job picture in our national economy seems to be splitting between low-income service jobs and higher-income technology jobs. A workforce capable of performing the tech jobs will be of increasing value.

Changing the culture enough to develop language-rich, "dialogic living" environments for young children is not an easy task, but it is not an impossible one, either. After all, "Talking Is Teaching" is an easy enough concept to grasp, and the spectacular growth in communications technology in recent years -- a factor often cited as a reason for the drop off in talking in families -- can be flipped to an advantage by using media and entertainment technology to carry the message.

It is a profound irony that the powerful growth in media and technology has transformed every aspect of modern life -- commerce, sports, politics, finance, diplomacy, war -- but still has had little impact on education, particularly early childhood education. Many teachers and programs in the early childhood community have resisted technology: Television, cell phones, and electronic games are often seen as interfering with children's learning.

Yet most adults and children spend a significant portion of their time using media and technology, despite conflicting messages about how much is acceptable and what is appropriate for young children. In fact, surveys by the Fred Rogers Center and Kaiser Family Foundation show that many parents believe media and new technologies to be helpful for children's learning and important for intellectual development. Questions about content and time spent with media and technology are important and should continue to be asked, but there is every reason to grab the power of communications technology today to reach parents and help them help their children.

Technology is only beginning to be accepted as an effective educational tool, and school leaders are coming to understand that, if children (and their parents) are going to be saturated in media, we have to harness that power for positive learning outcomes. A new field, which we might call "teachnology," is emerging, and we should tap it aggressively to help all parents, including those most in need of resources and support.

The science of early childhood development has grown immensely over the past hundred years, particularly the last half century. Those families with higher levels of education and greater resources more often receive the benefits of new findings about the cognitive and emotional development of young children. The tragedy is that almost none of this understanding reaches disadvantaged families. Surely the age of technology offers a signal opportunity to creatively and effectively share this learning with the families who need it the most.

Today, only a few organizations -- including the National Center for Family Literacy, the Fred Rogers Center, and Zero to Three -- are specifically focused on the challenge of helping parents create a positive dialogic living environment for children birth-to-3. As the potential of this agenda becomes better understood, the movement will grow. Just as the push to get all families to understand the importance of reading to children has yielded important benefits, so, too, can a parent-child-dialogue agenda help get children ready to learn.

A good deal of the potential is in the simplicity. Even the poorest parents, unable to afford programs and devices and special educational applications, can harness the power of talking, of creating the language-rich, affirmative environment needed to support young children's prodigious instinct for learning.

Just talk... talk, talk, talk... while you are doing the dishes, trimming the bushes, watching a television show... anything and everything in your everyday life. Not only does it make your child feel special, it is also one of the most effective ways that a parent can prepare a child for a lifetime of success.

In 1995, Betty Hart and Todd Risley recommended that the U.S. focus on this extraordinary opportunity. Fifteen years later is not too late.