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Kids Need Conversational Competence

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People tend to overestimate their conversational skills. We've all had bad conversations. In fact, more than four out of five people say miscommunication partly caused a past failed relationship. And yet, when a discussion goes badly, fewer than one in five believe they are to blame. We mostly assume the other person did something wrong.

Imagine how difficult it is, then, to teach good conversational skills to our kids if we automatically assume that they cause the arguments. How do we resolve issues with partners or co-workers if everyone thinks someone else is causing the problem?

Part of the reason we think we're good at conversation is we make a fundamental mistake: We confuse good talking with good conversation. We think that if we're funny and articulate and know interesting facts and keep people engaged, we are good at talking with people. But all of that merely indicates that you're good at talking, not listening.

Giving a great speech requires good talking. To be a great conversationalist, you must be as good at listening as you are at speaking, and active listening can be very difficult. That's especially true in our perpetually distracted society in which, on average, adults check their phone every 12 minutes, and 1 in 10 can't go 4 minutes without using their device. And 86 percent of us will check our phones while talking to friends and family, a practice that's called "phubbing."

Learning to Talk Face-to-Face

Yet, the need for good communication skills has never been higher. Research shows that, while email can increase the likelihood of miscommunication and escalate conflict, talking on

the phone and talking in person are highly effective and efficient ways to communicate. If you hope to set your children up for success, you can't go wrong by teaching them how to talk with other people without using an electronic device.

After all, research shows that people with good communication skills have better marriages, make more money, and have higher self-esteem. One survey of managers showed that the most highly prized skill in hiring is effective communication and it's also the most common area of incompetence among new college graduates.

Several years ago, a teacher named Paul Barnwell gave his students a communication project and was surprised by how much they struggled to complete it. Writing in *The Atlantic*, he observed that “conversational competence might be the single-most overlooked skill we fail to teach students. Kids spend hours each day engaging with ideas and one another through screens—but rarely do they have an opportunity to truly hone their interpersonal communication skills.” The experience led him to ask: “Is there any 21st-century skill more important than being able to sustain confident, coherent conversation?”

It's a Matter of Evolution

Conversation has always been crucial to our species' survival and it's still the one thing we do better than any other creature. Human beings aren't faster than most animals, or more resilient or stronger. We don't have claws or a thick hide or any of that stuff.

What we do have, though, is an advanced cerebral cortex and incredibly sophisticated communication skills. We have evolved specifically to talk to each other. Our ears evolved to hear other people. We may sleep through the night, but our ears keep listening even while we sleep. We will hear a shout of alarm or a scream.

Many evolutionary biologists think humans may have developed language for economic reasons. We needed to trade, and we needed to establish trust in order to trade. Language is very handy when you are trying to conduct business with someone. “I need ten wooden bowls,” some early human might have said, “And I'll trade you six bunches of bananas.” That

transaction would have been nearly impossible using only gestures and unintelligible noises.

This is all to say that conversational skill is possibly the most important skill you have. It also means that we do our best work in groups. Our brains are designed to think in conjunction with other humans and to function as a hive mind. We don't particularly like a diversity of opinions; we prefer when other people agree with us. But we do better work when we are forced to grapple with opposing views. We're more accurate, less prone to errors, and more creative in a diverse group. Working together is the *Homo sapiens* way.

That means Paul Barnwell is right: Conversation is perhaps the most important skill any of us can develop and should be a high priority when deciding what to teach our kids. For every public speaking course that's offered, we should add a course in how to listen. For every class in computer skills, we should also require a course in interpersonal skills.

Putting Our Ears to Work

As I mentioned earlier, teaching the next generation how to improve their conversation demands that we first acknowledge our own weaknesses in this field. In order to model good conversational etiquette, we must stop blaming miscommunication on others and identify the areas in which we need to improve.

Perhaps the most common weakness is a failure to listen actively. A conversation should be a balance between talking and listening, but most people tip the scale toward talking. They don't often struggle to describe what they're mad about or what they want but tend to have trouble allowing others to tell their version of events or describe their process.

It's not just you. Humans struggle to listen well—it's hard for our species. That didn't start with tech and it won't become magically better if we get rid of our smartphones and computers. Tech makes it even harder to focus on what others say, but it doesn't cause the problem in the first place.

The scientist who conducted some of the seminal research into listening is Ralph Nichols, also known as the Father of Listening.

He dedicated his career to the subject. And his takeaway in the end was that, “people in general do not know how to listen. They have ears that hear very well, but seldom have they acquired the necessary aural skills which would allow those ears to be used effectively for what is called *listening*.”

We become worse at listening as we age, it seems. Nichols ran a test in elementary schools. He’d have teachers stop suddenly and ask the kids what they were just saying. A full 90 percent of the 1st-graders got it right, while 80 percent of the 2nd-graders got it right. Of junior high students, only 44 percent got it right; in high school, the average fell to 28 percent. Another study showed that when adults listened to a 10-minute presentation, half of them couldn’t answer basic questions about what they heard. Two days later, 75 percent of people had forgotten what was said.

The truth is, it’s hard to listen instead of talk. A study done at Harvard showed that talking about yourself and your opinions or your experiences activates the same pleasure center in the brain as sex and cocaine. It feels good to talk about what you like and what you don’t. It can be difficult to stop doing something that feels good and let someone else speak.

Three Types of Listening

Think about the three types of listening. There is evaluative listening, during which you’re only listening to decide whether you think the other person is correct or not. Your responses are generally some version of “You’re wrong” or “I agree.”

Then there is interpretive listening. With this type, you are trying to interpret what you’re hearing and make sure you understand.

The final kind of listening, and the deepest, is transformative listening. While engaged in transformative listening, you are willing to be changed by what you hear. You accept that the other person’s views are as valid as your own, and you are truly involved in a dialogue. This kind of listening, along with interpretive, are relatively rare in our everyday exchanges, but with practice we can learn to become better listeners.

As it turns out, if you listen more, chances are you will enjoy conversations more. A recent study asked what factors increased people's enjoyment of conversation the most—was it volume, length or something else? They found that people enjoyed conversations more when they spoke less. And that was true whether they were talking to loved ones or strangers.

Active listening is a conscious act. You must decide that you're going to listen well and then put energy behind it. Most likely, it won't happen naturally. Listening well requires focus. Author Stephen Covey said, "Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply. They're either speaking or preparing to speak." Often, we engage in a conversation because we want to say something, not because we want to hear.

The Hard Work of Listening

Here are some ways to improve our listening.

First, listen for ideas. What is the deeper meaning of the speaker's words? What is the speaker really trying to say? Ask for clarification.

Also, listen for the difference between facts and feelings being shared. Which part of the message is a description of a feeling about an event? "She is maddening" is a feeling. It's not less important, but it's important to hear the difference.

Remember to respond not to what you assume was said, or think was said. You can't possibly know the speaker's motivations or intentions. "I think" is a fact, "you think" is an opinion. Respond to what was actually said. Listen all the way to the end of the sentence. Try to summarize what was said in your head.

Try to resist the temptation to analyze and judge everything that was said, to immediately determine if you agree or not. As Steven Covey says, listen to understand, not to condemn or approve. Listening to others doesn't mean you agree with them.

In order to listen better, it's best to hold your conversation in a place with no distractions, so put your phone away and turn your face away from your computer.

Listening is not something we master and then know how to do for the rest of our lives. We have to work at it, but the benefits are incredible.

And these are benefits we can pass along to our kids. Teach them how to talk—and, more important, teach them how to listen. Give them the skill of conversational competence.

Resources

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Celeste Headlee is a journalist and author of several books, one of which is *We Need To Talk: How To Have Conversations That Matter*. Her TEDx Talk, “10 Ways to have a Better Conversation,” draws from her work as a public radio host.