

Talking *with* Kids When Assisting with Learning

We all know how **to** talk to youngsters.

Talking **with** them is another matter.

Two guidelines to think about when talking with kids:

- *Be comfortable with little conversation*
- *Give and take openly and genuinely*

Is a Lot of Talk Necessary?

There's an instructive fable about a family with an eight year old boy who had never spoken.

One morning at the breakfast table they were quietly eating, as was their custom, when all of the sudden someone said, "How come my hot cereal is cold?"

It took a second for the parents to realize the words had been uttered by their son.

Dumbfounded, they looked at him.

Finally, the mother stammered, "Y-Y-You spoke!"

"Certainly," said the boy.

"But," asked his father, "why haven't you said anything before?"

"I didn't need to, everything's been fine up to now."

Some youngsters are fond of talking a lot and often; others aren't. In helping with learning, it's important to be comfortable with their predilections and to avoid pushing them to talk more than they want to.

Dialogues can go on without a lot of words.

Think about all the times you communicate without words. Sometimes you just don't feel like talking or just don't have the right words or find that what you want to communicate is best said without words. It's the same for youngsters – often more so.

There are many times when you want to know what's going on in a child's head, but it is important to remember not to push. Invite sharing, but if s/he doesn't seem inclined to do so at the moment, let the youngster know that you don't mind.

Asking Questions

It's easy to ask questions when assisting with instruction. Too easy!

It's usually not so easy having to answer one question after another. And even if the questions are easy to answer, question and answer sessions do not a dialogue make. Questions can raise feelings of anxiety. It doesn't take too many before it feels like an interrogation. The youngster may see the questioner as prying or demanding. At the very least, answering adults' questions can be boring.

Giving a kid more information than is wanted or relating long and involved directions can produce the same sort of effects. Worse yet, too many directions may convey mainly the message: "Do as I tell you; I'm in charge here!" That's a recipe for backlash.

With respect to learning activities, a good approach is to discuss options and choices and ways to explore and enjoy the activities. And take every opportunity to offer supportive comments and encourage suggestions.

Listening

When the youngster does talk, stop what you're doing and *listen*. And listen attentively.

Listen not only to the words, but to the music – to feelings conveyed in the way the youngster is talking. If the music is happy, you'll probably want to say so ("You sound very happy about that!"); if the sound is a not very happy that also should be acknowledged. No question is necessary. You don't have to ask "Are you unhappy? anxious? bored?" Your comments often will be enough to start a dialogue about the youngster's feelings, *if s/he wants to talk*.

There's a lot happening when two people are involved with each other in a helping relationship. There's plenty of interesting and relevant things to talk about. And a youngster may be both relieved and fascinated to hear that you've had similar experiences.

"Your new math assignment reminds me of something that happened with my work today."

"Oh yeah?"

"I had to figure out something, and I got so nervous that I couldn't do it right."

"Hey, that's what happened to me during my math quiz today"

"When something like that happens to me, I get very embarrassed and a little angry."

"Angry?"

"Yeah, angry at myself for choking up and angry at my boss for making me do it."

"What did you do?"

"I decided that next time I wouldn't hurry; I'd keep calm and not let it get to me."

"I wish it were that easy."

"If I can do it, so can you. Here's what I do."

If there is interest, take time to practice some coping strategies*.

Openness and Genuineness

Remember that what you're trying to do is develop an ongoing, collaborative, trusting relationship. You want the youngster to feel good about asking for help. You want the youngster to want to share feelings and thoughts with you – *positive and negative*.

To achieve all this, you will need to be open and genuine in carrying on the dialogue. Openness and genuineness involve being willing to share your thoughts and feelings with the child. If you want him or her to share with you, you must be willing to share yourself.

Of course, this doesn't mean taking every opportunity to talk about what's on your mind. And as Joubert has stated, keep in mind that "children have more need of models than of critics."

Just as you often wonder what's going on in the youngsters head, there are times when s/he is wondering what you're thinking. That's one of the best times to share.

Share freely and in a way that you think *will help (not interfere with) the relationship*. This will show the youngster that it's all right for people to share what's on their minds and will provide a good model for how to do it.

Pressuring a youngster to talk can seriously interfere with the helping process. As long as you're in contact and communicating on some level, you can help a child learn. Sometimes a touch, a smile, or a wink are better than words.

***For Coping strategies for kids 5-12, see <https://kidshelpline.com.au/kids>;
for teens, see <https://kidshelpline.com.au/teens>**

I don't know the answer to 99% of what my six-year-old asks me, says a business operations director. Thank goodness for YouTube, Alexa, and Google.