

Review

Talk With Your Child: A Brief For Professional Education

Harvey S. Wiener

by

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American mothers and fathers spend less than forty-five minutes a day talking with their children. Harvey Wiener contends that the development of critical thinking and decision making skills depend on the active involvement of parents with children.

Talk With Your Child, Wiener, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs at the University of New York, also links advances in vocabulary and comprehension to a "conversational household." According to Wiener, "We don't learn by 'sitting and listening to smart people talk; we do learn by engaging in conversation in which we make choices rooted in the give and take of human exchange.'"

The author is sounding a simple call for parents to talk to their children. *Talk With Your Child* was inspired by the author's wife, who daily faced the impoverished language resources of preschoolers." Ideas for the book come from children, teachers, colleagues, and students. This relaxed analysis of problems and possible solutions is presented in a straightforward manner.

Wiener discovered that parents believe schools are providing the oral communication skills needed by their children. Schools teach the "rules" of communication but assume the "practice" is happening at home. Finding time for practice is difficult within American culture because we are so busy. One young child expressed the thoughts of many when saying "Everyone thinks my mom is terrific because she's smart and works hard and is famous. She has time to travel all over the world and has long talks. The only person she has no time for is me." When we do talk to our children it could best be described as a "to and at" conversation. For some unknown reason, we also tend to pay less attention to the language of our children as they grow older.

Many parents want success for their children. We now have

children's weekend college, science labs, foreign-language classes, and the list goes on. Hothead is a term used to describe the efforts of many well intentioned parents who hope to force the growth of their children "like seeds in the moist sultry air of a greenhouse." Many parents don't have a clue as to how they can really help their child.

Wiener believes that most language learning is left to chance. It is this very language acquisition that forms the basis of future reading and writing efforts. What parents need to do is simple and takes little time. They need to become a "conversational partner - gentle, loving, openminded, inquiring, respectful, patient, relaxed, intelligent." With a parent's entrance into the language world of a child, there is often a resulting emotional well-being and strengthened parent-child relationship.

The author presents a smorgasbord of activities appropriate for every age child and every parent personality type. A pervading philosophy appears to run throughout - talk to your child about everything. We are told to talk about "unstructured play, daily events, television programs, dreams, books, radishes, and laundry detergent."

Many of the myths surrounding baby talk are dispelled. According to *Talk to Your Child*, baby talk used appropriately will help to build communication. Communication at a very basic level is a forerunner to higher levels of communication. Parents don't need to worry about delaying language development with baby talk. In fact, Wiener gives advice for improved baby talk by encouraging parental development of a higher than usual pitch, pattern of rhythm, and simplicity and repetition.

The author challenges another pervading notion - the idea that parents should be teaching phonics and helping to develop vocabulary. A warning is issued to all would-be parent reading instructors, "They'll hate reading. And you'll hate it too." As an alternative, the final chapter is devoted to a discussion of fifty books a parent and child can read aloud and discuss. The questions for discussion following each lengthy summary are especially helpful.

Oral stories can be the delight of a child. Very specific criteria are elaborated on and a parent is given concrete direction for formulating and telling original stories. Wiener uses personal examples from his own child rearing that are both amusing and helpful in translating theory into practice.

Language can be a thrilling experience for a child. "Creative questioning"

as a child add concrete details to their oral communication and brings the best in ideas and expression. Once again, the author offers many practical suggestions to make this "creative questioning" a reality.

and the section entitled, "Eleven Cardinal Rules for Establishing Conversational Families" to be the most helpful. Ideas were presented that I feel would radically change American families such as: "discuss day's best and worst moments, in facing decisions with your child, few options; then ask your child why she chose what she did, prohibit cell phones at home if someone else is present, discourage talk on the phone if someone else is present in the room."

Wiener provides parental guidelines for monitoring television usage in what he calls the "electronic age." In addition to a typical "ration system," the author has proposed creative "television talk." Why not let the powerful medium of television serve as a catalyst for conversation within the family setting?

"Conversational Inventory" was formulated to help each family assess their attitudes toward talking with young children. This twenty-five item instrument could serve as a challenge to many parents to improve the conversational climate of their home. A typical item from the test is, "Do you ask your child to explain the picture she draws or the designs she constructs?"

During the research phase of this book, the author noted that teachers' children are especially literate. Investigation brought out the reason for the fact. It wasn't simply that teachers have high expectations of their children, but rather, they communicate belief in the educational establishment and support its values. Teachers also tend to understand and practice child-development theory much more than the average parent. Why, as teachers are, they are doing some things differently!

Although Wiener presents numerous activities for language development that would appear to work, few have been tested in a systematic manner. The reader is left to guess if these activities directly correlate to language development. Admittedly, *Talk to Your Child* is intended for the lay educator and is not designed as a scholarly work.

Before researching and writing *Talk to Your Child*, the author was engaged in typical parent talk such as, "You've got to stop asking questions you can hear the story"; "Please, Joseph, stop talking and listen." With a quite different attitude, the author now has the keys needed to unlock the language world of his children and those across our country and the world.

Wiener clearly presents the rationale and procedure for effective parent-communication. The author is not calling for parents to structure massive quantities of "learning time" but simply to talk with their child. If every parent across our nation were to invest two to three hours reading this book, I feel a healthy freedom of expression would result for our children. Unfortunately, the very parents who would profit most from Wiener's book will be the least likely to open the cover.