Skill 3: Communicating

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In her book *Mind in the Making*, author Ellen Galinsky outlines seven essential life skills that all draw on and promote executive functions of the brain—the network of skills we use to manage our thoughts, emotions, and behavior as we pursue goals. In this issue, Ellen and Nicole discuss the third life skill, communicating, and offer teachers practical suggestions for promoting this skill in their work with preschoolers.

Have you ever been surrounded by people speaking a language you didn’t understand or doing things differently than you would do them because they are from a different culture? What was that experience like? How did you figure out what those around you were trying to communicate? Did you look at gestures, facial expressions, or body language?

Learning to communicate

These are the kinds of clues that young children use as they begin to develop the skill of communicating. Communicating is much more than understanding language, speaking, reading, and writing—it is the skill of determining what we want to communicate and realizing how our communications...
will be understood by others. Communicating, like all of the life skills, depends on executive functions of the brain, like focus, cognitive flexibility, inhibitory control, and working memory.

**Focus**
Being able to direct our attention to and focus on the communication at hand is fundamental to effective communication.

**When communicating, children rely on focus to**
- Engage in a back-and-forth conversation, with or without words (communicating involves language, the arts, dance, etc.)
- Use movements such as gestures, words, and symbols to indicate what they want to convey
- Pay attention to how others are responding so that they can continue the conversation

**Cognitive flexibility**
As topics and situations change, we must use flexible thinking to initiate and follow a conversation and respond accordingly.

**Children engage in cognitive flexibility while communicating when they**
- Take on roles during pretend play, continuing the “story” as it evolves
- Play rhyming games with word sounds that keep changing
- Play a sport or game in which they have to be open to and respond appropriately to what others do
- Learn and use words from another language

**Inhibitory control**
When communicating, we often must rely on inhibitory control to stop and think so as not to say or do something that may not be appropriate for the situation. To understand the perspectives of others and how they will react to what we say, we have to put aside our own thoughts and feelings.

**Children use inhibitory control in communicating when they**
- Think before they speak, considering how others will hear what they say
- Listen to others
- Wait to take turns talking

**Working memory**
Not only do we need to remember what we want to communicate, we also must hold in mind what the other person is sharing with us, and then use that knowledge to keep the communication going.

**Children rely on their working memory to communicate in order to**
- Retell a past experience in words, with a block building, or in a drawing
- Identify and label pictures in books
- Remember how a classmate or teacher reacted to what they said or did in the past, and then use a form of communication that works

**How can we promote the life skill of communicating in young children?**
One of the most important scientific findings about promoting the life skill of communicating is what researchers at the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University call “serve and return.” Like a game of ball where one person says or does something (serves) and the other person responds (returns), these are back-and-forth conversations with and without words. Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University calls them “conversation duets.” You can use these conversations for scaffolding children’s learning—listen to what children are trying to say, and then build on and help extend their learning.

Here are some suggestions for promoting the skill of communicating with the children in your life.

**See books and stories as platforms for conversation**
Catherine Snow, of Harvard University, says,

The book creates a platform on which the conversation takes place. [The adult is there to] interpret, to name the pictures, to describe the action, to explain what’s going on. This is one of the reasons why research shows that families in which children are read to regularly are families whose children are more likely to arrive at school ready to learn, with bigger vocabularies and a greater capacity to participate effectively in classrooms. [It's] because they’ve had this kind of focused conversation with adults!

For example, if you are reading aloud *The Cow That Went Oink*, by Bernard Most, talk back and forth with the children about the funny sounds the animals make and how communicating involves listening carefully to the way words sound. For further tips, see [http://mindinthemaking.org/firstbook/tipsheets/Communicating-TheCowThatWentOink.pdf](http://mindinthemaking.org/firstbook/tipsheets/Communicating-TheCowThatWentOink.pdf).
It is crucial to support young children as they acquire the tools of language and other forms of self-expression, while also helping them learn how to truly use those tools to communicate clearly and effectively.

Help children express themselves in many different ways
Drawing, painting, singing, dancing, and more—when children have the chance to explore various types and styles of communication, they are encouraged to think flexibly and deepen their understanding that they can communicate their ideas in many different ways.

Conclusion
Communicating is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today. It is crucial to support young children as they acquire the tools of language and other forms of self-expression, while also helping them learn how to truly use those tools to communicate clearly and effectively. Ask children to revisit their experiences by talking about them, drawing pictures, building with blocks, and dictating stories that you write down.

This is the fourth article in an eight-part series appearing in TYC's Good Guidance column. Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs is available from NAECYN.

Stay tuned for our next installment on the life skill of Making Connections, TYC

Have conversations with children that encourage them to communicate
You can do this by asking them open-ended questions that go beyond the here and now, like “What if...?” or “What do you think?” This kind of talk goes on longer than just a sentence or two and involves asking more than yes or no questions. Make sure you respond to children’s comments, and keep the conversation going.

Create an atmosphere where communicating through language is joyful
You can use stories, songs, word games, or silly rhymes to help children enjoy the beauty and power of language and self-expression.