

# Talking is doing something, especially with young kids

Polish up your family legends.  
Talking has big benefits.

By Jim Sollisch

CLEVELAND

My wife, Rique, is a big talker (and an accomplished listener). When we first met, I told her she spoke in paragraphs. I meant it as a compliment. She wasn't so sure. She believes in the power of the spoken word, in the magic of stories. And she uses a full arsenal of language in her role as a teacher of young children in a therapeutic school. She believes that words are actions, not just symbols. And so when I say, "Let's stop all this talking and do something about this or that," she says, "Talking is doing something."

And so I couldn't wait to show Rique an article I had run across in *The New York Times* about the power of talking to babies. Research shows that the number of words a baby hears in its first three years of life correlates with IQ and success in school. The researchers believe that the entire achievement gap between low-income children and their more affluent peers could be eliminated if both groups heard the same number of words in their infancy.

Rique wasn't surprised. She was a mother who spoke to her babies nonstop. Nothing was too small to escape comment. What came intuitively to Rique, though, isn't universal to moms. There's nothing in our genes that encourages us to talk a blue streak to babies who respond by staring up at the light or kicking their feet randomly or nodding off.

The study, conducted by Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley of the University of Kansas, recorded and analyzed hundreds of hours of parent-child conversations. Here's what they found: A child whose family was on federal assistance heard about 600 words an hour; working-class children, about 1,200 words per hour; and children from professional families, a whopping 2,100 words an hour.

In their analysis, after accounting for other factors, they concluded that the greatest determinant of success in school was the number of words a child hears before age 3. (Words heard on television or other media actually had a detrimental effect.) Their research has been validated by several other studies, and now Providence, R.I., with a \$5 million grant from the Bloomberg Philanthropies' Mayors

Challenge, will begin coaching lower-income parents in the art of family conversation.

Most of the coaching will focus on observation and narrating every action: Mommy is putting on your shoes. Your shoes are brown. They're smaller than Mommy's shoes. You're touching Mommy's sweater. It's soft.

But hopefully this steady stream of details will also create in children a need for input — that their parents' words become nourishment and that kids end up craving stories like they crave sweets. There is also evidence that kids who know their families' stories are much better adjusted than kids who don't.

Marshall Duke, a psychologist at Emory University, along with his colleague Robyn Fivush, developed a simple 20-question scale called "Do you know?" It asks things like "Do you know where your grandmother grew up? Do you know where your parents went to high school?"

They gave the survey to 66 kids and then compared the results with a battery of traditional psychological tests the kids had previously taken. They found an overwhelming correlation: The kids who scored highest on the "Do you know?" scale turned out to have higher levels of emotional well-being.

The more you know about your family's story, the more you feel a part of something bigger. You see yourself as a character in an ongoing saga, a narrative of successes and failures, of striving — because that's the story of every family. So it turns out my wife is right — talking is doing something. Words and stories — not apps and educational toys — may be the key to smarter, more successful children.

So the next time your children ask for a story, you don't have to conjure up faraway kingdoms and alien creatures. Tell them about the time you hit the game-winning shot. Tell them about their grandfather, who lived in America for 40 years without ever learning English. Tell them about their grandmother who, when her husband died, talked her way into his job as a traveling auto parts salesman back in 1944. That's a story my mother told my brother and me, a story that reminded us we come from a family that doesn't take no for an answer.

It seems to me that the best stories are the ones only we can tell our children.

■ Jim Sollisch is creative director at Marcus Thomas Advertising.



PAUL LACHINE