

AWAKENING CHILDREN'S MINDS

How Parents and Teachers
Can Make a Difference

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child-rearing literature? Certainly because they sense its effectiveness, borne out by decades of research.

Authoritative parenting, whether assessed through direct observation or older children's ratings of their parents' communication, is linked to many aspects of competence. In early childhood, it predicts positive mood, self-confidence and independence in mastery of new tasks, cooperativeness, and resistance to engaging in disruptive behavior.⁴⁹ And in middle childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood, it is related to high self-esteem, social and moral maturity, academic achievement, and educational attainment.⁵⁰

A major contributor to these favorable outcomes is the fuel that warmth grants to adult expectations. Warm, caring adults offer explanations and justifications for their demands. In doing so, they invite children to judge the appropriateness of their requirements. When children view demands as fair and reasonable, they are far more likely to heed and internalize them. A warm, involved adult is also more likely to be an effective reinforcing agent, praising children for striving to meet high standards. And when children stray from goals that a parent or teacher regards as important and it is necessary to be firm and disapproving, a warm adult has a much greater chance of changing the child's behavior than does an adult who has been indifferent or negative. Children of involved, caring parents find the interruption in parental affection that accompanies a reprimand to be especially unpleasant. They want to regain their parents' warmth and approval as quickly as possible.

In sum, scaffolding is a warm, sympathetic collaboration between a teacher and a learner on a challenging, goal-directed task that the adult helps bring within the child's "zone." Observations of adult-child pairs reveal that the diverse ingredients of scaffolding—matching the adult's assistance to the child's changing needs, suggesting effective strategies, posing questions that encourage children to think about higher-order relationships, and interacting warmly and praising children for competent performance—consistently relate to children's task engagement and learning.⁵¹

THE POWER OF CONVERSATION. The instructional mode of communication inherent in scaffolding is well suited for tasks with clearly defined goals. Conversations, in which adult and child reflect on everyday events, are more free-ranging. They can dwell on virtually any aspect of experience—of living and working together. This makes them an especially powerful tool for assisting children in building an internal mental life infused with a cultural worldview.

When people converse with one another, they engage in a form of dialogue called *narrative*—a storylike mode of communicating, composed of a sequence of events with people as main characters. In the narrative, which may be real or imaginary, characters' roles and mental states—feelings, intentions, beliefs, opinions, and knowledge—are revealed.⁵²

To illustrate, suppose someone asked you to “tell the story of your life.” In forming a spontaneous autobiography, people link together smaller stories about incidents and occasions, with the self at their center and other influential people in supporting roles. The narrator arranges the stories sequentially, to conform to a culturally accepted organization of time. And he or she not only recounts, but *justifies* the stories—that is, makes them comprehensible by explaining why they happened as they did.⁵³

The mini-stories in our life narratives focus on exceptional experiences—events that stand out against the backdrop of ordinariness in our daily lives.⁵⁴ For example, a move to a new neighborhood, a first date, a high school graduation, an important job interview, a wedding day, the birth of a baby, and special achievements or failings are likely to be included. The various entries are derived from our social interactions, at the time the events occurred and thereafter. When others join with us in celebration, approve or disapprove of our actions, or convey information or opinion that changes our outlook, they bestow special meaning on the events. And so we include those events in our autobiographies, elevating them to lifelong significance.

In everyday conversation, the events discussed resemble the mini-stories of our spontaneous autobiographies. For example, in recent narrative exchanges, I talked with a friend about her daughter's sudden breakup with a fiancé; with my husband about a controversial play we had seen; and with one of my students about how she might handle a troublesome roommate. Each narrative focused on a relatively exceptional personal experience. And in each, my partners and I addressed the legitimacy of characters' intentions, weighing personal desire against socially acceptable behavior.

For example, referring to her daughter's breakup, my friend complained, “It wasn't *that* she did it but *how* she did it. She shouldn't have promised she'd join him in Chicago and then reneged. His mother called a few days later and said how betrayed the young man feels. You can't back out like that, with no warning, no explanation, after he had already rented the apartment.”

“The whole family knew the relationship had problems,” I countered. “She's paying him for the apartment. Doesn't that lighten her obligation?”

During the conversation, my friend and I exchanged a wealth of cultural meanings about how relationships should be and about the maturity and

morality of the daughter's behavior. The telling of the narrative also invited reconstruction of what might have occurred between the daughter and her fiancé, thereby placing the event in a wider context of possibilities. In the process, the dialogue highlighted characters' internal states—the daughter's motivations, her boyfriend's feelings, and my friend's struggle to make sense of the breakup.

Readiness for Narrative. Our narrative dialogues with young children have the same features as do our narratives with adults, only in simplified form. In these conversations, we arrange events in logical, sequential order, and we focus on explaining unusual, hard-to-interpret occurrences, often by dwelling on characters' intentions and perspectives.

Even before they begin to talk, children display a readiness to participate in narrative.⁵⁵ After an adult describes and demonstrates some activity (for example, putting a teddy bear to bed), 1-year-olds who as yet have little language can easily reproduce the main steps in correct sequence with toys.⁵⁶ When toddlers begin to speak, their main interest is in talking about what people do and the consequences of their behavior. Listen to the two-word utterances that appear between 15 and 24 months of age, and you will find many expressions like these: "Tommy hit"; "Get cookie"; "Mommy truck" (meaning "Mommy push the truck"); "Daddy outside"; and "My dolly."⁵⁷ At the end of the second year, children begin to label their own and others' internal states with words, such as "want," "happy," "mad," "think," and "pretend."⁵⁸ These assertions about human action, desire, emotion, and perspective are the stuff of which narratives are made.

Early on, children are sensitive to yet another feature of narrative. At birth, they are captivated by unusual events, perking up their eyes and ears when something new and different happens. In keeping with this innate bias, the first narratives children produce focus on making sense of the atypical. "Look, the sun is sleepy, going to bed," said 2 1/2-year-old David while watching the sun disappear below the horizon at the end of a day at the beach. At the sight of a woman with her leg in a cast, 3-year-old Rachel remarked, "Mommy, that lady got a big cut. The doctor sewed up her leg." (Rachel's brother had cut his leg a few days earlier and returned from the doctor with stitches and a bandage.)

An early armament of narrative tools enables children to quickly and easily comprehend and contribute to the narratives of expert members of their culture.⁵⁹ In families in which parents and children spend much time together, the flow of stories recreating personal experiences is abundant.⁶⁰ Through them, adults help children construct increasingly elaborate images of themselves and teach them culturally accepted ways of organizing and interpreting their experiences. As a

byproduct of participation, children gain a rich understanding of their own and others' mental lives—powerful tools in predicting and explaining human behavior and, therefore, in getting along with others. And in enabling children to practice and perfect narrative skills, adult–child conversation provides crucial preparation for literacy. Let's take a closer look at these diverse benefits of narrative conversation.

Forming an Autobiographical Self. Consider, once again, the narrative task posed earlier, to relate “the story of your life.” Think back to the earliest event you can remember. At what age did it occur?

For the large majority of people, memory for autobiographical events begins around age 3.⁶¹ Practically none of us can retrieve happenings at younger ages—a phenomenon called *infantile amnesia*. What causes this early memory blackout, and how is it that after age 3, certain events differentiate themselves from a multitude of everyday experiences so they stand out for a lifetime?

Some researchers conjecture that growth of the cerebral cortex and other brain structures is necessary before children can store experiences in ways that permit them to be retrieved many years later.⁶² Similarly, several psychological explanations focus on changes in the nature of memory during the preschool years—from an unconscious, automatic, and nonverbal system to one that is conscious, deliberate, and verbal.⁶³ Perhaps the second system cannot access events stored by the first, making the earliest events of our lives forever irretrievable.

Yet the idea of vastly different approaches to remembering at young and older ages has been questioned. Children 1 1/2 to 3 years old can describe their memories verbally.⁶⁴ And sometimes they even recall events that happened to them as preverbal infants! For example, while walking past a distinctive house with a fenced-in front yard, 22-month-old Lisa said to her mother, “Scary doggy!” Nine months earlier (before the child could talk), the family had taken the same walk. On that occasion, Lisa had seen a ferocious dog barking behind the chain-linked fence. Over time, neither the family walk nor the scary dog will be part of Lisa's personally relevant memory. Yet the train trip across the country she will take at age 3 1/2 and her first day of kindergarten at age 5 may still be memorable when she is 80.

A growing number of researchers believe that rather than a radical change in the way experience is coded into memory, two other milestones lead infantile amnesia to give way to memory for personally significant experiences:

1. *A Psychological Self.* To build an autobiographical memory, children must have a well-formed sense of self—as a person who, despite changes in appearance (a new haircut, becoming taller and more mature

looking), remains the same on the inside over time. Once constructed, this persisting *psychological self* serves as an anchor for unique experiences, which are retained easily as long as they become personally meaningful.⁶⁵ A psychological self is not firmly in place until age 3 or 4.

2. *An Autobiographical Narrative.* Besides a firm sense of an inner self, autobiographical memory depends on organizing personal experiences in narrative form so they become part of a life story. How do children learn to structure memories as narratives during the preschool years? Much evidence indicates that they acquire this skill through conversations with adults.

As early as 1 1/2 to 2 years, children begin to talk about the past, guided by adults who prompt them and expand on their fragmented recollections. At first, parents provide most of the content and structure of the story. But very soon, children's contribution increases, as can be seen in this short excerpt of a mother talking with her nearly 3-year-old daughter about a recent Halloween celebration:

Child: Once on Halloween the kids was over and I had a princess dress on me.

Mother: You had a princess dress on? Did you get any candy? Did you go door to door? What happened?

Child: We went treating.

Mother: You went treating! And who took you?

Child: Andrea's mother took us. And my mom . . . and we brought a pumpkin too.

Mother: What did you do with the pumpkin?

Child: We lighted it.

Mother: What did it look like? Was it scary?

Child: Uh-huh. Dad made cuts in it with a razor. He made a face too. That was funny.⁶⁶

Notice how the mother provides details and, by asking "who" and "what," encourages her young daughter to enrich the narrative. As children participate in these dialogues, they adopt the narrative thinking generated in them and retain many details about past events, made personally meaningful in the context of parent-child conversation.

Observations of parent-child interaction reveal that parents vary in how they engage children in narrative talk. Some, like the mother in the conversa-

tion just given, use an *elaborative style*, in which they pose many, varied questions; add information by building on children's statements; and volunteer their own evaluations of events, as in "Was it scary?" Other parents use a *repetitive style*. Appearing rushed, impatient, and inattentive to the child's comments, they contribute little information and ask the same short-answer questions over and over: "Do you remember Halloween?" "What costume did you wear?" "Do you remember what you wore?" The elaborative style is considerably better at fostering preschoolers' narrative skill, since 2- and 3-year-olds who experience it produce more coherent and detailed personal stories when followed up 1 to 2 years later.⁶⁷

Children's conversations with elaborative-style parents increase in complexity as language development proceeds, creating a zone of proximal development in which narrative competence expands. Between 3 and 6 years, children's descriptions of special, one-time events—a family excursion, a grandparent's visit, a first trip to the dentist—become better organized and more elaborate. Spurred by adult prompting, older children also add more background information—"when" and "where" the event took place and "who" was present. By including these details, children place personally significant experiences in the larger context of their lives.

Finally, between 4 and 6 years of age, evaluative statements, which help to clarify "why" an event is personally meaningful, become common. Older children more often embellish their descriptions with modifiers, such as "My mask was *ugly*" or "The kite flew *high*." At times, they even add drama by intensifying these expressions, as in "The kite flew *very, very high*" and "Grandma ate a *huge* bowl of oatmeal for breakfast!" And like the autobiographical and everyday narratives that adults generate, children's narratives increasingly focus on people's internal states—their desires, feelings, and beliefs: "She *wanted it so much*" or "I *felt bad*."⁶⁸ Furthermore, the richness of 6-year-olds' evaluative remarks can be predicted from their mother's evaluative statements in an adult-child conversation 3 years earlier⁶⁹—a finding that underscores, once again, parents' vital role in creating a "zone" for narrative development.

In sum, as children share memories, mark them as personally meaningful, and begin to create their life story, the people to whom they are close become vigorous contributors to their self-constructions. From the beginning, the child's sense of self is not isolated, encapsulated inside the head. Rather, it is shaped by and situated in children's everyday social experiences—in the dialogues with parents, teachers, and other cultural experts within families, preschools, schools, and communities.

Acquiring Cultural Beliefs and Values. Through dialogues with adults, the child derives not just a self, but a *self imbued with culture*. The stories, both real

and fictional, that parents and teachers relate to or jointly construct with young children are laced with cultural beliefs and values. They have profound socializing implications.⁷⁰

At times, adults tell children stories that carry important self-relevant lessons. For example, recently I listened in as a father and his 5-year-old son waited in the foyer of a synagogue for a Jewish New Year service to begin. The father wove an animated tale about a boy named Chaim, who had great difficulty remaining quiet during the holiday service. Little Chaim had a brand new whistle in his back pocket, and he badly wanted to play it. With great effort, he resisted, turning and twisting in his seat until, finally, when the Rabbi blew the shofar (ceremonial ram's horn), Chaim could bear it no longer! A moment later, the clear, high-pitched sound of the whistle could be heard over the Rabbi's final shofar blast. Everyone in the sanctuary turned toward Chaim, who cringed with embarrassment. But much to Chaim's surprise, all the congregants cheered and thanked him for making the shofar ritual more beautiful than ever. And Chaim's father praised him for sitting quietly, *almost* to the end of the service.

Five-year-old Mark listened to his father's story with rapt attention, asking questions and adding personal comments: "Where did Chaim sit?" "Did he (like Mark) bring a book to read?" "Was Chaim allowed to get up and go to the bathroom?" "Was the Rabbi angry at Chaim?" The story disclosed that adults realize a long service is hard for a small boy to sit through, but exercising self-restraint and participating in communal rituals bring praise and acceptance from the community. The analogies Mark drew between his own life and Chaim's suggest that he had (as his father intended) experienced the story from a personal vantage point, identifying with its events and applying them to himself.⁷¹

Systematic research reveals both cultural similarities and differences in adult-child narratives. In an intensive observational study of daily storytelling in two communities—six middle-class Chinese families in Taipei, Taiwan, and six middle-class American families in an Irish-Catholic neighborhood in Chicago—Peggy Miller and her colleagues⁷² found that preschoolers and their family members routinely narrated past experiences. Most often, they created joint accounts of pleasurable holidays and family excursions—birthday parties, the fair, the zoo, and McDonald's for the American children; the night market, the zoo, and riding on trains and horses for the Chinese children. Both groups also talked about times the children were ill, sad, or frightened.

In a smaller set of narratives, the topic addressed—either directly to the child or to someone else while the child listened—was the child's misbehavior. These stories, more than any others, seemed deliberately aimed at teaching social and moral standards. Chinese parents, however, were far more likely to initiate these

tales of misdeeds than were Americans. In fact, 35 percent of Chinese adults' narratives with or in the presence of 2 1/2-year-old children focused on past transgressions, whereas only 7 percent of American narratives did.⁷³

Furthermore, interpretations of children's misbehavior differed between the two cultures. Consistent with the Confucian parental obligation, "The deeper the love, the greater the correction," Chinese mothers' "misdeed" stories were much longer than those of the American mothers—in fact, the most lengthy and elaborate of all Chinese narrations. Sometimes they occurred right after the child committed a transgression; at other times, they reminded the child of earlier improper behavior. Chinese mothers typically corrected the child repeatedly: "What did you say?" "So, what *would* you say?" "Then how would Mom have reacted?" And in line with the Confucian reliance on formal stories with moral lessons, these informal narratives often ended with direct teaching of how to act: "Saying dirty words is not good," and (after the child agreed) an expression of affection—a hug, a tender touch.

In instances in which American stories referred to young children's misbehavior, mothers frequently deemphasized these acts, attributing them to the child's spunk and assertiveness. This does not mean that American parents seldom instruct their children in social and moral rules. They often do so, largely through guiding remarks that accompany children's ongoing actions, as in "Don't grab. Share the toy." "Hold hands when crossing the street." "You hurt Johnny. Say you're sorry."

As Miller notes, the way social and moral lessons are integrated into narratives affects children's frameworks for judging themselves and interpreting their social experiences. Through everyday stories, the Chinese adults personalized moral lessons and stressed obligations to parents and other authority figures. They also reminded children of the impact of their transgressions on others—an element dramatically illustrated in one mother's recounting of her 2 1/2-year-old's disruption of his older sister's music lesson: "Ai, you made Mama lose face. . . . I wanted to dig my head into the ground. Right? [Child smiles, shakes head]"⁷⁴ American narratives rarely dwell on misdeeds and, at times, even recast children's offenses as strengths—as indicative of quick thinking and an active, spirited disposition.

Miller describes the generally high self-control the Chinese children in these families displayed—listening attentively to elders and complying without reminders. For example, even at age 2, they waited patiently to open a small gift until a guest had departed—proper etiquette in Chinese culture. Of course, this does not mean that Americans ought to change their child-oriented narratives to be just like those of the Chinese. The socializing impact of a particular

narrative style is strengthened by its consistency with a family's and community's way of life. Also, the narrative variations we have considered tap only a small slice of cultural diversity in adult-child storytelling. The most important lesson we can take from Miller's provocative findings is that when parents and teachers take time to construct narratives with and about the young child, they create a "zone" that spurs children to weave moral and social rules into their self-definitions and to behave accordingly.

Understanding People as Mental Beings. We have seen that talking about mental states is a major focus of narrative conversation. In narrative, we express the "folk psychology" of our culture—our deeply ingrained assumptions about human desires, emotions, and beliefs, and our judgments of certain ones as more acceptable than others. Indeed, violations of our folk psychology are a major impetus for engaging in narrative.⁷⁵ Through conversing with others, we try to make puzzling events and behaviors understandable.

Because people's desires, feelings, and beliefs often differ, conversations are full of social negotiations—attempts to reconcile different versions of reality. Recall how I suggested to my distraught friend that her daughter's breakup with her fiancé might have been defensible, given problems in the relationship and the daughter's willingness to compensate the young man for his monetary losses. Similarly, a 2-year-old who says that the sun disappearing below the horizon is "sleepy" is likely to receive an alternative explanation. And as parents recount the misdeeds of their children, the children gain access to others' evaluations of their egocentric, inconsiderate acts.

According to psychologist Jerome Bruner, learning to negotiate differing viewpoints through narrative is a crowning achievement of human development.⁷⁶ Conversations about personal experiences are prime sources of social stability. When out-of-the-ordinary events occur and we experience clashing views, we often look for a good listener—a friend or a loved one we can talk to. By collaborating with this partner in conversation, we talk out our perspective, seek our partner's view, search for meaning in seemingly chaotic events, and try to reconstruct a comprehensible world. In these conversations, we may not agree with our partner's point of view, but we usually acknowledge that we comprehend and appreciate it—and our partner generally does the same.

By joining in conversation and listening to the narrative dialogues of others, children develop an understanding of their own and others' rich mental lives. Children with a good grasp of mental life can detect the likely inner causes of another person's behavior and use that information to anticipate what that person might do next. Such children are also more adept at empathizing—reading others' emotions and vicariously experiencing them—a response that

increases the chances that they will react with sympathetic concern and help others in need.⁷⁷ As early as 3 to 5 years of age, emotion knowledge—awareness of the circumstances that prompt different emotional reactions and the social consequences of expressing one's feelings—is related to friendly considerate behavior, willingness to make amends after harming another, and peer acceptance.⁷⁸

Research verifies that the more families talk about inner states, the greater children's knowledge of them. For example, mothers who frequently label and explain emotions have preschoolers who use more emotion words in conversation. Maternal prompting of emotional thoughts ("What makes him afraid?") is a good predictor of 2-year-olds' emotion language. Later in the preschool years, explanations ("He's sad because his dog ran away") are more predictive.⁷⁹ Consistent with Vygotsky's concept of the "zone," sensitive parents adjust the way they talk about emotions to fit children's increasing competence. And in line with what we have said about narrative as a vital context for negotiating differing viewpoints, discussions in which family members disagree about feelings seem particularly helpful in prompting children to step back from the experience of emotion and reflect on its causes and consequences.⁸⁰

Attaining a Subtle Grasp of Mental Life. Around age 3 to 4, children's understanding of mental life undergoes a profound transformation. Older preschoolers realize that people's beliefs, not just their desires, affect their behavior. This advance is apparent in children's awareness that people can hold *false beliefs*.⁸¹ To test for a child's grasp of false belief, researchers present situations like this one: Show a child two small closed boxes, one a familiar Band-Aid box and the other a plain, unmarked box. Then say, "Pick the box that you think has the Band-Aids in it." Almost always, children pick the marked container. Next, ask the child to look inside both boxes; when she does, contrary to her own belief, she will find that the marked one is empty and the unmarked one contains the Band-Aids. Finally, introduce the child to a hand puppet and explain, "Here's Pam. She has a cut, see? Where do you think she'll look for Band-Aids? Why would she look in there?" Only a handful of 3-year-olds but many 4-year-olds can explain why Pam would look in the marked box: "Because she *thinks* there's Band-Aids in it, but there aren't any."⁸²

Mastery of false belief shows that children regard beliefs as *interpretations*, not just reflections, of reality. It marks the transition toward a more complex, active view of the mind, which will flourish over the next few years—the realization that people can engage in a great many inner activities, from concentrating, remembering, and understanding to guessing, comparing, and inferring.⁸³ Before age 4, most children assume that physical experience determines mental experience—that if Band-Aids *are* in the unmarked box, every-

one will *just know* where they are. But preschoolers who grasp false belief recognize that people can, on the basis of prior knowledge and experience, interpret the same event differently—an understanding that is invaluable for social life. Children who are good at detecting others' points of view are better at thinking of effective ways to handle difficult social situations.⁸⁴ Rather than just asserting their own desires, they try friendly persuasion. Or they suggest that a conflict be solved by creating new, mutual goals.

Like emotion knowledge, preschoolers' grasp of false belief grows out of conversations that touch on the mental lives of others. Without those conversations, this level of insight is slow to develop. The Junín Quechua language of the Peruvian highlands is unique in lacking words that describe mental states, such as "think" and "believe," so Quechua adults refer to mentality indirectly. For example, they use the phrase, "What would he say?" in place of, "What would he think?" Junín Quechua children have difficulty with false-belief tasks for years after children in industrialized nations have mastered them.⁸⁵ Furthermore, clear evidence exists that preschoolers who frequently interact with more competent cultural members—parents, extended family members, neighbors, older siblings, and older peers—are advanced in false-belief reasoning.⁸⁶ These social encounters offer children many opportunities to hear people refer to their own mental states and those of others and, therefore, to observe different points of view. When 3- and 4-year-olds use their newfound capacity to talk about mental states during play with friends, their understanding of false belief improves further.⁸⁷

Finally, as children participate in narratives and listen to those of others, they acquire culturally accepted ways for negotiating clashing viewpoints. This equips them with skills for engaging in conversation without confrontation and persistent conflict—competencies that are crucial for sustaining warm, pleasurable social relationships. Gratifying social ties, in turn, serve as vital contexts for further cognitive and social development.

Preparing for Literacy. Most parents hope that during the preschool years, their children will develop the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that prepare them to read and write in elementary school. This interest in literacy is well founded. Reading and writing are not just crucial for success in academic endeavors and later life. They are thoroughfares to vast realms of knowledge, enjoyable leisure pursuits, and contact with others at a distance—even in different historical time periods. Once children can read and write, they can explore the insights of countless authors and partake in their rich array of experiences. With those authors, they can forge highly varied and vastly expanded "zones" for learning.

Children can become competent readers and writers without being trained, pushed, or goaded into literacy learning in early childhood. As we saw earlier, preschools and kindergartens that emphasize drill on academic skills are detrimental. This way of teaching induces inattentiveness, restlessness, disengagement from challenging activities, and poorer achievement during the first few years of elementary school. Young children who are enthusiastic and self-confident about learning and who achieve at their best in the early grades have acquired literacy-relevant knowledge informally—through exposure to books and other reading materials at home, in preschool, and in child-care environments; through observing adults reading and writing in everyday life; and especially, through narrative conversation.

Literacy-related behaviors *emerge* in these contexts; consequently, early childhood educators refer to preschool competencies that lay the foundation for reading and writing as *emergent literacy*. Indeed, no clear dividing line exists between prereading and reading. As literacy experts Grover Whitehurst and Christopher Lonigan put it, “Reading, writing, and oral language develop concurrently and interdependently from an early age from children’s exposure to interactions in social contexts in which literacy is a component, and in the absence of formal instruction.”⁸⁸

Research consistently demonstrates that language development in early childhood is strongly related to later reading competence—and to academic achievement in general during elementary school.⁸⁹ Furthermore, both language progress and an array of emergent-literacy skills can be predicted by the sheer amount of verbal interaction in the home during the first few years of life—a relationship that holds for children of all socioeconomic levels. Conversations with adults are especially powerful contributors to early childhood language proficiency and, in turn, to literacy development.⁹⁰

A strong language foundation is vital for becoming literate because people read to extract meaning. Children can more easily derive meaning from the printed page when their vocabularies are large and they have come to think in ways that resemble the narrative styles on which the large majority of written texts are based. By repeatedly listening to and participating in narrative conversation, children develop mental scripts for the way narratives are typically organized. Then, when they start to read, the organization of text material readily makes sense to them, and they extract meaning more easily.

One of the clearest indicators of young children’s understanding of stories, and other prereading skills, is the extent to which they can give elaborate, detailed accounts of past events.⁹¹ Children sharpen this competency through conversing with adults, who add information, ask questions, and prompt children to

increase the sophistication of their descriptions and explanations—in essence, who use an elaborative style of narrative talk. Whitehurst and his colleagues have encouraged parents and teachers of young children to integrate the elaborative narrative style into shared adult–child storybook reading, an approach called *dialogic reading*.⁹²

Typically, an adult reads while a child listens—a format that is beneficial to early literacy development⁹³ but that cannot guarantee the child's attention, involvement, and comprehension. In dialogic reading, the adult encourages the child to become a participant in the narrative, even a storyteller. Using books with pictures that convey a story line but that have limited text so the adult is less likely to revert to straight reading, the parent or teacher has the child relate much of the story. The adult assumes the role of an active listener—querying, encouraging, and expanding on what the child has to say. As in other narrative talk, the adult increases the complexity of his or her questioning to fit the child's language progress. For 2- and 3-year-olds, questions focus mostly on describing events, actions, and objects. For 4- and 5-year-olds, questions more often address narrative organization (“What happens next?” “How does the story end?”); analyses of characters (“Why did the little girl want a teddy bear?”); and connections between the book and the child's everyday life (“Have *you* ever seen a fire engine on its way to a fire?”).

When parents and teachers use dialogic reading consistently over several weeks to several months, children show gains in language development, print knowledge, and writing progress that are still present six months to a year later.⁹⁴ Although children differ widely in intrinsic interest in reading activities, shared reading can spark the interest of children who seldom seek out literacy-related pursuits on their own. Aspects of adult behavior—warmth, dramatic quality, and attempts to get the child to participate actively—heighten children's interest and involvement in reading.⁹⁵ An interested child is more likely to request shared reading times, notice features of print that are important for reading, ask questions about them, and (later on) read on his or her own.

As older preschoolers begin to attend to features of print, adults can combine shared book reading with scaffolding of children's knowledge of letter names, letter–sound correspondences, and print conventions (for example, that books are read from left to right and top to bottom of the page, that spaces are used to separate words and periods to end sentences). Adults can also assist young children as they become interested in writing by responding positively to their writing-like creations and helping them attain their writing goals in daily activities and play—printing their name or a message, making a storybook, or adding items to a shopping list. Along with general language and

narrative competencies, relaxed informal teaching of basic reading and writing skills—in limited doses and without excessive feedback about right and wrong—fosters emergent literacy and aids the process of learning to read and write after children begin school.⁹⁶

In sum, adult–child conversation—in book-reading and other contexts—is the best way to prime young children for becoming interested, accomplished readers and writers. Shared reading with parents is particularly influential—more so than reading with teachers. In one study, Lonigan and Whitehurst compared shared reading with teachers at preschool, shared reading with parents at home, and a combined condition. All three groups gained in oral language skills compared to children receiving no intervention. But children experiencing home reading improved the most.⁹⁷ Parents seem to be in the best position to read to their child often and to tailor their dialogues to the child's interests and abilities.

Other Contexts for Joint Adult–Child Engagement

When parents and children spend time together, opportunities for scaffolding of new skills and for conversation are nearly limitless. Parents who capitalize on these moments ensure that their children internalize the history, values, knowledge, skills, habits, practices, and understandings of their families and communities. We have already seen how academically related tasks, family celebrations, family outings, and adult–child storybook reading are excellent focal points for adult–child engagement. Make-believe play is yet another. Indeed, joint participation in make-believe with more expert cultural members is so important for development during early childhood that I devote an entire chapter to it. Other vital contexts for adult–child engagement include everyday routines and duties, mealtimes, and television viewing. Each of these settings has distinct and highly significant developmental benefits, as long as adults take time to enter into them and mentally connect with children.

EVERYDAY ROUTINES AND DUTIES. By participating in everyday routines and duties at home and in preschool, children develop a sense of responsible participation in family and community life. At the same time, they acquire practical skills and a wealth of knowledge about their physical and social surroundings. The parent always in a hurry—who says, when the child desires involvement, “There isn’t time,” or who fails to insist that the child join in household tasks in keeping with his or her capacity—severely limits the child’s learning.

In preindustrial times, children spent most of their day alongside parents as they went about housekeeping and earning a livelihood. As a result, children became deeply familiar with adults' daily activities, picking up many skills through observation and direct participation. (Recall John Ise's account of family life on a rural Kansas homestead, described in Chapter 1.) Greater parent-child togetherness throughout the day is also common in tribal and village societies, where adults spend less time supporting children's learning through verbal scaffolding because children have so many opportunities to observe and participate directly in the work of adults.⁹⁸

Because fine-tuned scaffolding is seldom required, adult-child participation in everyday routines and duties—preparing a meal, washing dishes, raking and bagging leaves in the garden, buying groceries—offers extra time for conversation, with all its attendant benefits. In addition, many informal learning opportunities arise that will serve children well when they get to school. An astute mother I observed in the grocery store had her 3-year-old son, Ricky, reach for items on the shelf and put them in the cart. When at the checkout counter Ricky became restless and whiny, his mother handed him her credit card and directed him to watch closely for the moment the clerk would need it. As the boy turned toward the register, the mother pointed out how the price of each item appeared on a screen. Ricky alternately named the numbers he recognized and counted items as they passed through the checkout. Awed by the responsibility of handing over the credit card, a task he had seen performed only by adults, Ricky complied eagerly—and also saw numerical concepts in action! Although grocery shopping with Ricky might take 10 or 15 minutes longer than otherwise, it has wide-ranging benefits for his development.

Children, as parents and teachers well know, are not always eager to perform chores that adults set for them. But they are more willing when they see adults engaged in those duties, when adults explain why it's fair that everyone help, and when their relationship with those adults is warm and gratifying.⁹⁹ These communicative ingredients motivate children to join in with a cooperative spirit, which demonstrates that they have moved beyond the adult's position to one of their own—that is, internalized social norms with conviction.¹⁰⁰ In doing so, young children demonstrate once again their strong desire to become part of cultural life.

MEALTIME CONVERSATIONS. Mealtimes—usually dinner—are special social contexts for families in complex societies. They are among the few occasions in which parents and children regularly gather after spending most of the day apart and in which the main family activity is relating to one another. Hence, mealtime talk overflows with opportunities for socialization.

Mealtimes and similar occasions for family togetherness open special conversational doors. Because all family members are present, dinner talk can convey to children a sense of family coherence and identity.¹⁰¹ Most of us can still recapture the stories our parents told us, in which social and moral lessons were powerful and abundant. Here is one my mother told me, recalled in vivid detail nearly a half century later: "Once, when your grandfather was 16 years old, he came home weeping, his hands all bloody from working in the factory. His mother, your great grandmother, wiped away his tears and said, 'Don't cry, one day you'll own that factory.' And by the time he was 30, he did."

Dinnertime recaps of daily events also permit today's children, isolated from the adult world of real work, to gain access to their parents' daily lives. I learned much about my father's experiences as a retail merchant through stories he related to my mother at dinnertime: "Sofie, you'll never believe the customer who came into the store today. She complained so vehemently about a perfectly correct bill that it took two of us to escort her to the door."

Family mealtime conversations, whether children participate directly or listen to the exchanges of others, also provide special instruction in discussion skills, since they are among the few routine occasions in which children are permitted to enter an adult conversational world.¹⁰² When meals are shared with children, parents can model and teach cultural rules regulating conversation—appropriate topics and politeness ("We don't say food is disgusting at the table") and subtle conversational strategies that children become proficient at only after much practice, such as how to enter a conversation and link with other participants' statements.

Finally, and perhaps most important, mealtimes allow parents to enter into their children's world and hear about the many facets of their lives, ranging from what the child did at school that day to reflections on how to solve peer or sibling problems.¹⁰³ Consequently, they serve to reinforce not just socialization but parental caring and support. The numerous benefits of this rich communal context are lost when family mealtime rituals diminish or disintegrate into frequent eating on the run or split adult-child meals.

The importance of family mealtimes is underscored by the fact that the most widely used research instrument for assessing the quality of young children's home environments asks parents whether the child eats at least one meal a day with a parent.¹⁰⁴ Scores on that instrument consistently predict early childhood mental development, no matter what the child's socioeconomic or ethnic background.¹⁰⁵

TELEVISION VIEWING. In Chapter 1, I noted that according to current survey findings, American adults spend over one-third of their free time—about

15 hours per week—watching TV. Estimates for children are even more ominous. Regular TV viewing typically begins between 2 and 3 years of age, consuming about 10.5 hours per week, or nearly 13 percent of the child's waking hours. It rises steadily over early childhood until it reaches an average of 28 hours per week for school-age children, or about 30 percent of the child's waking hours.¹⁰⁶ When we consider how much the set is on during school holidays and summer vacations, children spend more time watching TV than they do in any other waking activity, including going to school and interacting with family members or peers.

These statistics are averages; children differ in their attraction to television. For example, parents who watch a lot of TV tend to have children who do the same. Excessive TV viewing is associated with family and peer difficulties, poor school achievement, and serious health concerns—specifically, overweight and obesity as a result of hours of being sedentary and eating high-fat snacks while viewing.¹⁰⁷ Parents with stressful, unhappy lives often escape into television, and their children may do so as well.

It is crucial that parents exercise their gatekeeper role with respect to TV, limiting how much and what young children watch—to about an hour to an hour-and-a-half a day and to programs that are child-appropriate and informative and that teach positive social attitudes and behaviors. In addition, as much as possible, parents should watch with children and engage in joint conversation about televised information, helping them understand what they see. Parental oversight and involvement in children's TV viewing are essential for two reasons.

First, preschoolers easily misunderstand televised material. For example, at ages 2 and 3, they do not discriminate TV images from real objects; they say a bowl of popcorn on TV would spill if the set were turned upside down!¹⁰⁸ When a child believes that all people, objects, and events on TV are authentic, violence—so pervasive on American TV—becomes particularly terrifying. Although by age 4 children know that not all TV programming is real, they judge TV reality according to whether the images resemble people and objects in everyday life. Not until age 8 do children fully grasp the unreality of TV fiction—that characters do not retain their roles outside the TV show.¹⁰⁹

Furthermore, prior to this age, children have difficulty inferring characters' motives and connecting contradictory TV scenes into a coherent story line. They cannot appreciate why a character who at first seemed like a "good guy" but later behaves aggressively is really a "bad guy." They evaluate such characters and their actions much too favorably.¹¹⁰ For example, psychologist Sharon Purdie showed second graders a complex dramatic program in which an accused kidnapper, who had at first appeared friendly, tried to shoot a prosecu-

tion witness and got arrested during the attempt. Children who failed to grasp the kidnapper's motive and the reason for the arrest judged him to be "good," not "bad."¹¹¹

Second, weak government regulation of American TV means that without parental controls, child viewers are exposed repeatedly to antisocial attitudes and behaviors. The average American child finishing elementary school has seen more than 100,000 televised violent acts that provide "an extensive how-to course in aggression."¹¹² Television also hardens children to violence, making them more willing to tolerate it in others.¹¹³ Furthermore, although educational programming for children is highly sensitive to issues of equity and diversity, entertainment programming often conveys ethnic and gender stereotypes—minorities as villains and victims of violence and in subservient roles; men as dominant, powerful, and competent and women as attractive, emotional, and submissive. The more children view, the more likely they are to endorse such stereotypes.¹¹⁴ Finally, as many parents are aware, television advertising manipulates children's beliefs and preferences. Although children can distinguish a TV program from a commercial as early as age 3, below age 8 they seldom grasp the selling purpose of the ads.¹¹⁵ Rather, they think that commercials are well-intentioned efforts to be helpful to viewers.

These worrisome findings are not an inherent part of the TV medium. Instead, they result from the way it is used in American culture. In actuality, television has as much potential for good as it does for ill. For example, TV content depicting acts of cooperating, helping, and comforting encourages these behaviors in children.¹¹⁶ But most of the time, programs mix benevolent and hostile intentions in the same character. Unfortunately, children are riveted by a character's aggression and miss the caring message. Television promotes positive social behavior in young children only when it is free of violent content.¹¹⁷

Despite widespread public concern about the impact of TV on children's development, many parents do little to regulate or guide their children's viewing. When parents do make an effort, preschoolers watch less TV, find educational programs more appealing, and more often view shows with their parents.¹¹⁸ Parent-child co-viewing creates conditions in which adults can raise questions about the realism of televised information, assist children in making sense of the story line, and express disapproval of negative on-screen behavior and commercial messages, thereby teaching children to evaluate TV content rather than to accept it uncritically.

Interestingly, parents who are warm, communicative, and firm but appropriate in their expectations have children who are less drawn to TV, particularly violent TV.¹¹⁹ Very likely, these parents set an example through their own TV

viewing, watch with their children whenever they can, and use TV programs in constructive ways, helping children move away from the set into worthwhile activities. A program about animals, for example, might spark a weekend trip to the zoo, a visit to the library for books about animals, or new ways of observing and caring for the family pet. Parents who intervene in their child's TV viewing so it is in keeping with the "zone" transform the TV medium from a negative to a positive force in the child's mental life, and they promote favorable cognitive and social development in many other ways as well.

DIALOGUES WITH CHILDREN: LARGER IMPLICATIONS

Compared to two or three generations ago, contemporary parents and children less often engage in the development-enhancing, joint activities discussed throughout this chapter. In 1970, long before parents became preoccupied with the "time bind," psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner reflected that children "used to be brought up by their parents."¹²⁰ Although the family, Bronfenbrenner noted, continues to have primary responsibility for children's character development, it lacks the strength needed to do the job because parents and children no longer spend enough time together. Ours is a split society—adults in one world, children in another. Too many families have separate adult-child living areas, each equipped with its own TV and other leisure pursuits so that parent-child dialogues seldom take place. When parents and children spend most of their time apart, the result is a profound dampening of parents' socializing power.

In the past, extended family members or adults in the neighborhood more readily stepped in when parents, for one reason or another, could not invest enough time in their children's lives. Today, neighborhood experiences are much more restricted. Housing enclaves where families know each other well and interested adults are available to "mind children's business" are rare. Children who live close to their grandparents benefit greatly, enjoying affectionate, playful relationships with them at early ages and looking to them for information, role models, family history, and values later on. But greater family mobility means that more children live a considerable distance from grandparents and other relatives. And parental divorce, which will affect 50 to 60 percent of American children born in the current decade,¹²¹ lessens contact with the non-custodial parent's extended family. In childhood, physical distance makes for a psychologically distant relationship.

Remove parents and other adults from active participation in the lives of young children, and the vacuum may be filled by unsupervised and ill-behaved