The Talking Cure

By Margaret Talbot

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In the nineteen-eighties, two child psychologists at the University of Kansas, Betty Hart and Todd Risley, began comparing, in detail, how parents of different social classes talked with their children. Hart and Risley had both worked in preschool programs designed to boost the language skills of low-income kids, but they had been dissatisfied with the results of such efforts: the achievement gap between rich and poor had continued to widen. They decided to look beyond the classroom and examine what went on inside the home. Hart and Risley recruited forty-two families: thirteen upper, or “professional,” class, ten middle class, thirteen working class, and six on welfare. Each family had a baby who was between seven and twelve months old. During the next two and a half years, observers visited each home for an hour every month, and taped the encounters. They were like dinner guests who never said much but kept coming back.

In all, Hart and Risley reported, they analyzed “more than 1,300 hours of casual interactions between parents and their language-learning children.” The researchers noticed many similarities among the families: “They all disciplined their children and taught them good manners and how to dress and toilet themselves.” They all showed their children affection and said things like “Don’t jump on the couch” and “Use your spoon” and “Do you have to go potty?” But the researchers also found that the wealthier parents consistently talked more with their kids. Among the professional families, the average number of words that children heard in an hour was twenty-one hundred and fifty; among the working-class families, it was twelve hundred and fifty; among the welfare families, it was six hundred and twenty. Over time, these daily differences had major consequences, Hart and Risley concluded: “With few exceptions, the more parents talked to their children, the faster the children’s vocabularies were growing and the higher the children’s I.Q. test scores at age 3 and later.”

Hart and Risley’s research has grown in prominence, in part because large-scale educational reforms like No Child Left Behind have proved disappointing. Addressing the word gap by coaching new parents sounds like a simpler intervention. Last year, Hillary Clinton announced a new initiative, Too Small to Fail, that emphasizes the importance of talking to infants and young children; in the fall, President Barack Obama convened a White House conference whose goal was to “bridge the word gap and put more young people on the path to success.” Other cities, including Cambridge, Massachusetts, have initiated programs similar to the one in Providence, and still others have begun public-awareness campaigns with radio spots and bus-shelter signs reminding parents to talk frequently to their kids. The notion of the word gap even turned up on “Orange Is the New Black,” when one of the inmates urged her boyfriend to talk with their new daughter, because “there’s all these studies that say that if you don’t talk to the baby they end up, like, fucked by the time they’re five.”

The way you converse with your child is one of the most intimate aspects of parenting, shaped both by your personality and by cultural habits so deep that they can feel automatic. Changing how low-income parents interact with their children is a delicate matter, and not especially easy.
Though cultural factors may well explain why some low-income parents talk relatively little with their toddlers, the most obvious explanation is poverty itself. When daily life is stressful and uncertain and dispiriting, it can be difficult to summon up the patience and the playfulness for an open-ended conversation with a small, persistent, possibly whiny child. In 2007, Richard Weissbourd, a senior lecturer at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, helped establish a campaign in Boston that urged parents to talk to their kids, and he organized focus groups with low-income parents. “You had some people working three jobs or dealing with the steady drizzle of helplessness and hopelessness,” he recalled. “That makes it hard to have vibrant conversations with a baby. They’d say, ‘Look, when I get home I have to clean and cook and do the laundry.’ They’re exhausted. They’d say, ‘Sometimes we have to put our kids in front of the TV.’” Weissbourd said of interventions like Providence Talks, “Maybe we have the model wrong. Maybe what we need to do is come in and bring dinner and help with laundry and free up a parent to engage in more play with their child.”

Patricia Kuhl, a co-director of the Institute for Learning and Brain Science at the University of Washington, has studied “motherese,” the brightly inflected talk that mothers, whatever their native language, direct at their babies, and that babies love. (Fathers and other adults, of course, are equally capable of saying “Soooo big!” in a singsong voice.) Kuhl told me, “Motherese, when you combine that with being one on one with a baby, is dynamite for language development.” Parents are paying full attention, speaking in that high, lilting voice for maximum reaction, giving babies a chance to babble and coo back. But, Kuhl added, “Motherese is, by nature, happy talk. If you’re stressed or depressed, it can be hard to get into that mode.”

Then, too, some parents may not see the point of talking to babies, who can’t yet speak, or even of talking much to toddlers, who do, but sometimes unintelligibly. Andrea Riquetti told me, “I think educated people are more aware of the importance of communication and interaction and language.” In some families, she said, “if a baby’s really ‘good’ they get to spend a lot of time alone in their crib.”

When I asked myself why I had talked a lot with my babies—and had read aloud favorite picture books to the point that I could recite them from memory—I realized that I hadn’t been driven mainly by knowledge of brain development or by pedagogical intent. It was just that talking made the daily labor of mothering more interesting. Long stretches of time with toddlers can be boring, and the unavoidable moments when you admonished and corrected them were, to me, the dullest. It was more fun if you satisfied your own intellectual curiosity along with theirs: reading books about African animals or Chinese New Year celebrations; trying to remember why the sky is blue; honing age-appropriate arguments for eating your carrots.

When a family places a very high value on discipline and respect for parental authority, there is often disapproval of talking back, which can inhibit conversation in general. To some extent, this attitude tracks with class, perhaps because many working-class parents, consciously or not, are preparing children for jobs and lives in which they will not have a lot of power or autonomy. The sociologist Annette Lareau, in her classic 2003 study, “Unequal Childhoods,” interviewed the parents of eighty-eight nine- and ten-year-old children, then closely followed twelve of these families in order to compare the child-rearing styles of middle-class parents with those of poor and working-class parents. The middle-class families she observed practiced what she called
“concerted cultivation”: enrolling kids in various organized activities led by adults, but also engaging even young kids in a lot of back-and-forth conversation with adults. Working-class and poor families favored an “accomplishment of natural growth” approach. Their children’s lives were less customized to their preferences or to their parents’ notions of how to develop their particular talents; discipline came in the form of directives and, sometimes, threats of physical punishment; talk was less extensive and less geared toward drawing out a child’s opinions.

When I asked Lareau, who teaches at the University of Pennsylvania, about the language aspect of her research, she said, “The class differences in the amount of speech inside the families really surprised me.” She recalled that a white working-class girl in her study once brought up a weighty spiritual matter with her parents: “We were sitting in their completely comfortable, pleasant living room. The girl was all excited. She said, ‘Do you know what a mortal sin is?’ The parents said, ‘You tell us.’ They listened to her answer, said nothing in reply, and went back to watching TV.”

In middle-class families, Lareau frequently witnessed the kind of verbal jousting between parents and children that gives kids a certain intellectual confidence. One upper-middle-class African-American family she spent time with—Terry, a trial lawyer; his wife, Christina, a corporate executive; and their nine-year-old son, Alexander—was especially fond of these kinds of debate. In one conversation, Terry playfully challenged his son to defend his list of favorite cars: “Last time, you said the Miata, the Mercedes, and the Bugatti. Which one is it?” Alex replied, “This is America. It’s my prerogative to change my mind if I want to.”

Lareau did not see the middle-class approach as inherently superior. “The amount of talk in those households is exhausting,” she said. “It involves a lot of labor on the parents’ part, and sometimes parents are really not enjoying it. Sometimes kids use their verbal acuity to be really mean to each other.” She often found the kids in poor and working-class families to be more polite to their elders, less whiny, more competent, and more independent than their middle-class counterparts. Still, Lareau concluded, the kind of talk that prevailed in middle-class households offered better preparation for success in school and in professional careers. It taught children to debate, extemporize, and advocate for themselves, and it helped them develop the vocabulary that tends to reap academic rewards.

James Morgan, the Brown University linguist, told me, “If you’re mainly confined to ‘Eat your food,’ ‘Chew every bite,’ there are going to be fewer words heard at the dinner table. As opposed to starting a conversation with ‘Hey, did you hear the blue whales are making a comeback off California?,’ or ‘Oh, they just discovered a huge new dinosaur.’ And, after all, almost all little kids are interested in subjects like that.”

Asking such questions often depends on having an education. But it’s not just the topics—it’s the mode of inquiry. Anne Fernald said, “As an educated mother, you have more experience with teacher talk, which is necessarily more abstract, because kids don’t share common ground when they come to school. Education helps you learn how to make yourself clear to people who are outside your point of view.”