

The talking cure ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

One morning in September, Lissette Castrillón, a caseworker in Providence, Rhode Island, drove to an apartment on the western edge of town to visit Annie Rodriguez, a young mother, and her two-year-old daughter, Eilen. Castrillón and Rodriguez sat down on a worn rug and spoke about the importance of talking to very young children. They discussed ways to cajole a toddler into an extended conversation, and identified moments in the day when Rodriguez could be chatting more with Eilen, an ebullient little girl who was wearing polka-dot leggings.

"Whenever she's saying a few new words, it's important to tell her yes, and add to it," Castrillón told Rodriguez. "So if she sees a car you can say, 'Yes, that's a car. It's a big car. It's a blue car.' "

Eilen suddenly said, "Boo ca!"

Castrillón looked at her and said, "Right! Blue car! Good job!"

Rodriguez noted that Eilen had recently become so enthralled by an animated show, "Bubble Guppies," that she had become "stuck on that word 'guppy.' " She went on, "Everything's 'guppy, guppy, guppy.' So when she refers to something as 'guppy' I try to correct it-like, 'No, that's not a guppy. That's a doll.' "

"Guppy?" Eilen said, hopefully.

Castrillón said, "Well, I think right now the important thing won't be so much telling her no but just adding words and repeating them, so she'll start repeating them on her own."

Rodriguez is enrolled in a program called Providence Talks, the most ingenious of several new programs across the country that encourage low-income parents to talk more frequently with their kids. Once a month, Eilen wears a small recording device for the day, and the recording is then analyzed. An algorithm tallies all the words spoken by adults in her vicinity, all the vocalizations Eilen makes, and all the "conversational turns"-exchanges in which Eilen says something and an adult replies, or vice versa. The caseworker who visits Rodriguez's home gives her a progress report, which shows in graph form how many words Eilen has been hearing, and how they peak and dip throughout the day.

Castrillón presented Rodriguez with the month's report. She leaned over her shoulder and said, "See, this shows the percentage of adult words. There were over fifteen thousand words spoken in that day."

"Wow!" Rodriguez said.

Castrillón noted that significantly more conversation took place when the TV was off, and that it had been off more that month than the previous one. "There was pretty high electronic sound last time," she said. "This time, there was very little." Rodriguez nodded, studying the printout.

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. Lissette Castrillón was sensitive to the challenge, and she had an appealing informality: she listened carefully to Rodriguez, praised her efforts, and said admiring things about Eilen, all while sitting cross-legged on the floor. But, perhaps inevitably, there was an awkward moment.

Castrillón had brought an iPad with her, and she played for Rodriguez a video of a mother shopping at the grocery store while her toddler sat in the cart—just to show, Castrillón explained, that you could "talk aloud when you're pretty much doing anything." The mother onscreen was blond and fit, and wore white jeans; she looked like a character in a Nancy Meyers movie, and her patter was so constant that it became wearying. "Here's our crunchy peanut butter, sweetheart!" she trilled, scanning an aisle filled with organic food. "Here's the Wild Oats one. Roasted almond butter. Crunchy. Let's get crunchy, Bubba." The cart was piled high, and the items looked expensive. "Bubba, we're running out of room. What are we going to do? Did Mommy buy too many groceries today? I think we should get the creamy, too, because Murphy does not like when I get that crunchy. And we like to have the peanut butter because peanut butter's good for you. It's got protein."

Rodriguez watched the video with a serious expression. It was hard to imagine her holding forth with such preening gusto in the organics aisle. Castrillón said, "Well, you know, just-whatever the food is you're buying, you can talk about color, shape, and texture."

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