

Cultivating Intellectual Dialogue at Home

By Patricia Steinmeyer

On a recent college trip with my high school daughters, we visited large universities and smaller liberal arts colleges, finding that each institution had its own, unique feel. However, we noticed one striking similarity—top colleges across the country are academically charged environments where students participate in classroom discussions and where vibrant, intellectual dialogue continues in the dining halls and dorms.

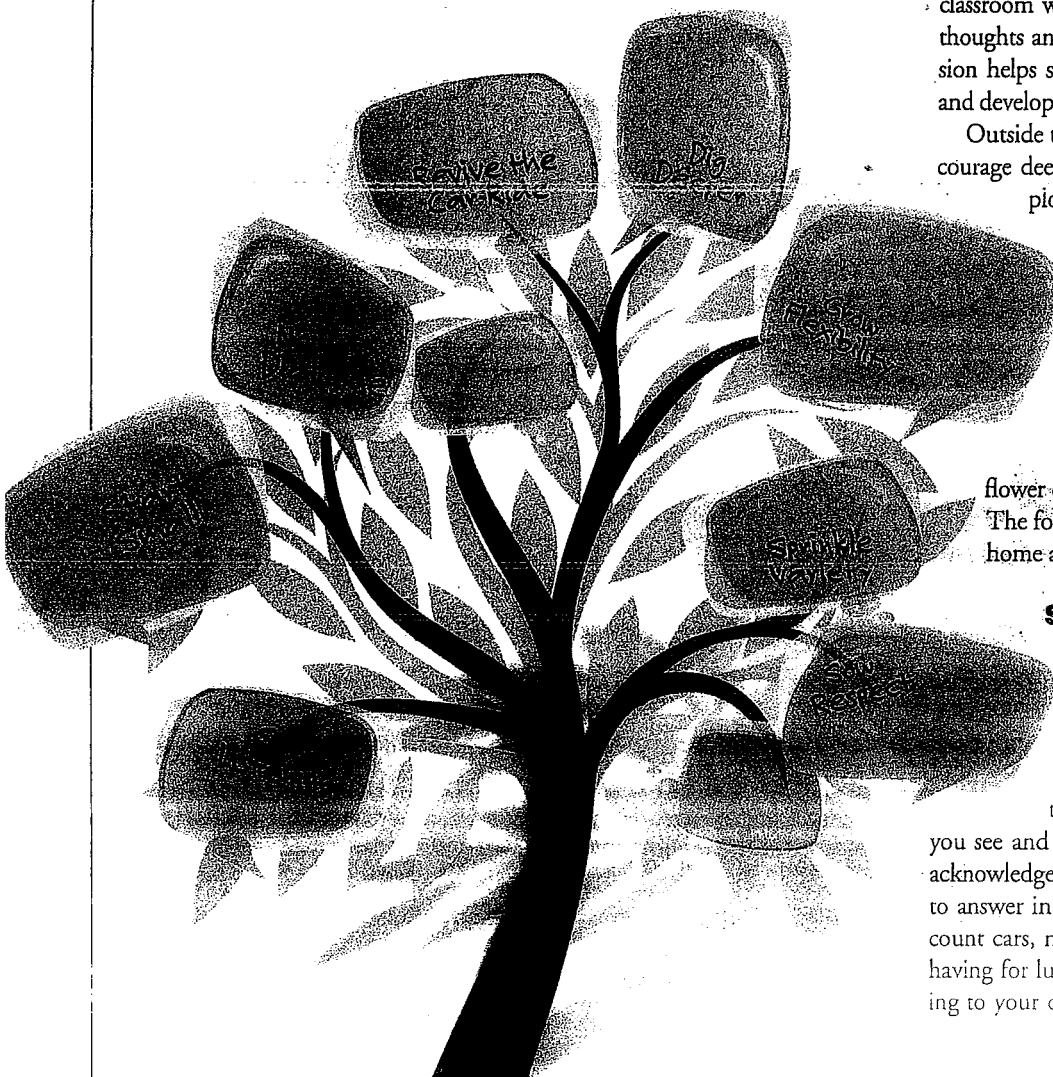
Engagement in the world of ideas is a hallmark of learning in college and beyond—where mathematicians defend theories, doctors explain prognoses, and professors share and explore hypotheses. For tomorrow's intellectual leaders, our children, the time to join in this dialogue is now, both at school and at home.

Advanced verbal ability is a trait associated with giftedness (Karnes & Stephens, 2008), and as a teacher, I observe that many high-ability children flourish in the classroom when they are encouraged to explain their thoughts and reasoning. Engaging children in discussion helps students gain knowledge, think creatively, and develop critical thinking skills (see Heacox, 2002).

Outside the classroom, parents can do much to encourage deep thinking and challenge children to explore new ideas by engaging in discussion at home. Yet, as parents rush around to enrich their children's lives with music lessons, summer camps, and enrichment classes, the power of simple, deep conversation is easily lost. In today's busy households where discussion is sometimes overrun by iPods and earbuds, making conversation flower can certainly take a little extra "watering." The following tips may help to grow dialogue at home and nurture high-ability learners.

Start Small

To encourage your child to become conversant with ideas, start talking when she is small. When you go on walks or run errands together, put your cell phone away and engage in the moment. Be sure to talk about what you see and ask your child about her surroundings; acknowledge her responses even if she is too young to answer in complete sentences. Describe the birds, count cars, note the weather, or decide what you are having for lunch. By making talking with and listening to your child a priority, you give the gift of time



and attention, as well as opportunities for her to engage in meaningful conversation.

Nourish Dialogue With High-Level Questions

In the classroom, asking questions that challenge students to make judgments and find creative solutions to problems stimulates high-level thinking. So why not try some engaging, high-level questions to nourish meaningful and caring dialogue at home?

Of course, everyday interaction with your child should not be “scripted” to artificially create intellectual exchanges. However, asking questions that encourage thoughtful discussions provides another avenue to connect with a verbal, high-ability child.

Set aside a few moments each day to discuss and reflect on daily events and challenges with your child. Rather than capping your child’s retelling of daily events with a generic nod or “. . . sounds neat,” taking a moment to ask a relevant, thoughtful question communicates to your child that you are listening. Sincere, open-ended questions such as: “How do you think someone else’s perspective may have differed from yours? What do you think is an important thing you learned from this?” or “How might things have turned out differently?” provide a wonderful catalyst for real, high-level dialogue that builds understanding relationships.

Moreover, look for opportunities to consider your child’s opinions on topics from books and movies to possible routes for a family weekend bike trip. Challenging your child to evaluate options and share creative solutions shows your child that you value her ideas and opinions. Inject everyday conversation with a few thought-provoking questions that your child may enjoy discussing with you, add some laughter, and more engaging conversations are bound to grow.

Grow Flexibility

The dinner table is often fertile ground for discussing topics that range from backyard birds to what it might mean if neutrinos

were to travel faster than light speed. Nevertheless, families often struggle to find the time to pause for a quick bite, let alone a leisurely dinner. When your family schedule makes the traditional dinner hour impossible, weekday breakfasts or weekend lunches are also wonderful opportunities for “sit-down” conversations. Be flexible when it comes to scheduling family mealtime, but stay committed to sitting down together to share food and conversation at least a few times a week.

At mealtime, avoid “force feeding” high-level discussion, but occasionally try to gently steer the conversation to the world of ideas—perhaps by asking a high-level question or two. Slow down, listen for your child’s thoughts, and enliven the dialogue with some thoughtful perspectives of your own.

Revive the Car Ride

An unmistakable mark of parenthood may be those “steering wheel calluses” that develop on our hands as we taxi children to lessons, pick them up from school, and run errands. Given this reality, why not make the car a conversation-friendly, video-free zone where thoughts and ideas are nourished?

If your car has a DVD player, keep it off. Instead, fill the backseat storage compartment with age-appropriate children’s magazines, a poetry anthology, maps, story problems, or brain teasers. In addition, if you have a CD player, use car rides to introduce your children to a wide variety of classical, jazz, and other musical styles. Compare different artists and talk about what music you like the best and why.

When time on the road seems endless, encourage children to occupy themselves by observing and appreciating the journey’s ever-changing landscape. Pack a nature guide and challenge children to look out the window and spot and identify indigenous wildlife. Encourage children to look out the car window, compare the view to places you have visited, or discuss how the environment

influences the communities that you pass on the journey. Note historical sites and towns along the way, and brainstorm rich descriptive words that capture the surroundings.

Sprinkle a Wide Variety of Reading Material Around

Leaving thoughtfully chosen articles and books around the home where children will pick them up is a simple way to encourage an exchange of ideas. Subscribing to a daily newspaper, printing online articles, and surrounding children with quality magazines such as *National Geographic Kids* and *Kids Discovery* are wonderful ways to keep a wealth of fresh conversation topics on hand.

The morning newspaper is a relatively economical and rich catalyst for discussion. Letters to the editor and editorials are wonderful resources for introducing children to new perspectives and ideas. Scan the paper daily for topics that are related to your child’s interests, such as the release of the latest movies, Women’s World Cup soccer, or meteor showers. When you read the morning news, share it with your child by opening it to an article of interest and leaving it where your child eats breakfast. The result is most always a little conversation about current events, sports, or music—and a smile.

Using the local library creatively can also reap large rewards with respect to spurring conversation. Of course, the library is a wonderful place for your child to visit and explore, but why not also “shop” the library yourself to check out a surprise present for her? Leaving a thoughtfully chosen library book on a child’s pillow that is written by her favorite author is a loving way to engage a child in reading and to encourage an exchange of ideas. Try leaving it with a little packet of hot cocoa mix or a favorite treat, as well as a note to say, “I thought you would enjoy this because . . .” After your child reads the book, be sure to ask her whether she enjoyed it, and why she feels that way.

Dig Deeper With Decorating

Decorating in a thoughtful way can make our homes more natural places for deeper thinking and conversation. Start with your main living space where your family spends the most time. As you arrange your family space, try placing the television where it is not the focus of the room, so that the space still feels complete when it is turned off. Do not leave the television on in the background all day.

Audio-visually packed, action-filled family living spaces can crowd out conversation with too much noise. When engaging programming or the daily news is on, let it spark dialogue as you watch and discuss it with your child; then, turn off the television. Allow your family room to be a quiet space for a few hours each day, and conversations may be more likely to occur. Set up seating to encourage family members to interact rather than to tune out one another with television or music.

To further encourage discussions that involve problem solving, think about replacing the knickknacks in your home that just take up space with more interactive “decorations.” What about displaying a pretty basket with some colorful, square pieces of paper and an origami instructions book in the corner? On the end table, what if the plastic fruit could become a dictionary and a game of Boggle or Scrabble? Would a chessboard on the coffee table, along with a children’s “how to” guide, create an interest in this fascinating game? One or two well-chosen activities provide a unique décor and invite problem solving and conversation.

Use the local library to help decorate your living room. Allow your child to choose some colorful, large picture books for the coffee table and rotate them every few weeks. A cycle of books showing coral reefs, dinosaurs, planets, and countless other topics can enlighten conversation in your family room—especially when they are set out in a way that draws attention to them and makes them accessible to everyone.

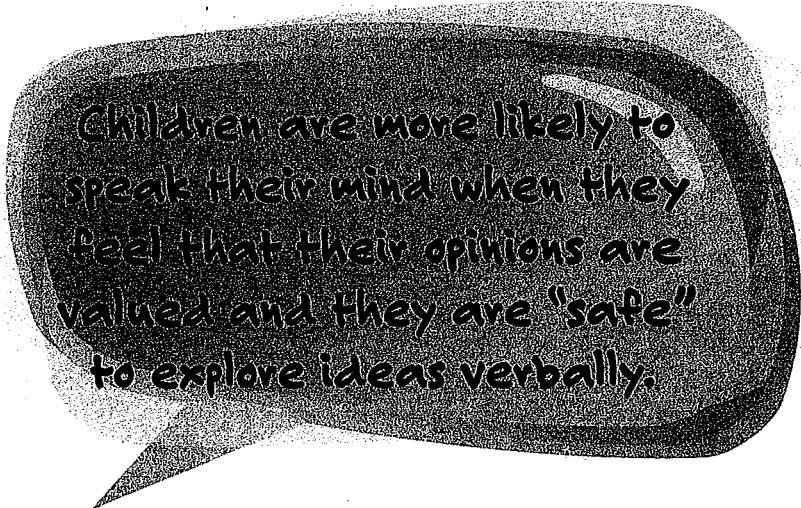
For a geographical touch, set a globe in an easy-to-reach spot or a wall map of the

world in a place where your family spends time. As you talk about places you’ve visited or discussed, encourage your child to locate them. Make your map a focal point for finding similarities and differences in geography, comparing countries, or simply for making a wish list for where your child would like to visit someday.

Sow Listening and Respect

Children are more likely to speak their mind when they feel that their opinions are valued and they are “safe” to explore ideas verbally. Pay attention to how you converse with your child—especially when you disagree with her views. Be sure to model respectful listening and acknowledge her perspective. Listen attentively when she speaks, and let her know by stopping what you are doing and looking at her. Repeat what your child says back to her to confirm that you understand, and be sure to ask a few questions about her ideas. If your child makes you think about an issue or change your mind, tell her so and explain why you were persuaded. Also, establish the expectation that your child listens respectfully while others speak.

When it comes to nurturing and challenging high-ability children, parents need to fuel thought-provoking conversation long before the college road trip. Immersing children in the world of ideas through dialogue not only prepares them for college and beyond, it is fun, it is intellectu-



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ally engaging, and it builds positive family relationships. The wonderful news is that with a little extra effort, we can turn the rich soil in our own homes and backyards to grow deeper conversations and thinking—even among the earbuds. ☺

Resources

- Heacox, D. (2002). *Differentiating instruction in the regular classroom: How to reach and teach all learners, grades 3–12*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit. (See pp. 147–152 for questions that encourage high-level dialogue in a classroom context.)
- Karnes, F. A., & Stephens, K. R. (2008). *Achieving excellence: Educating the gifted and talented*. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education. (See pp. 265–266, “Providing Home Enrichment.”)

Other Resources for Parents and Teachers

- *Quick Flip Questions for the Revised Bloom’s Taxonomy* available from Edupress (<http://www.highsmith.com/edupress>)

Author’s Note

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