

From the Classroom to the Dinner Table: How Can I Engage with My Child about Her Learning (and Keep Her Learning at Home)? [Published with FemmExpat, in French, 18 December 2018.](#)

Being connected to what goes on at school has become child's play. Many schools are now using LMS (learning management systems) that make it possible for each parent to track, in real time, schedules, attendance, homework and grades. A conversation with a teacher or with school leadership is a click away – an email sent from the keyboard of a smartphone can sometimes result in an almost instantaneous response. Additionally, chat groups formed by parents on platforms like WhatsApp are increasingly common and provide a multi-dimensional vision of school life, including the social and emotional aspects. Paper and pen correspondence now belong to a different era, and our always-on digital tools are the privileged means of communication with school. Yet, even with a total mastery of these tools, can we truly grasp what our children actually know and understand? How can we decipher what happens in class and how exactly a child benefits from classroom instruction?

Like so many parents, feedback from those at the [International School of Paris](#) (ISP) is that they often feel discouraged following succinct conversations with children about their school days. They would like to ask questions that invite children to explain the day's lessons in order to connect and extend their learning at home. ISP school leaders would like to further collaborate with parents and strengthen the home-school link. ISP, a genuine micro learning society where every member is encouraged to embark on a journey of lifelong learning ([see ISP's guiding statements](#)), decided to put in place parent workshops during which parents and ISP pedagogical experts come together two mornings per month in order to dissect subjects that in many schools remain mysteries: testing and grades, foreign language learning, wellbeing, screen usage, and many more!

Giving parents concrete and easy to implement solutions for successful conversations about school was an important objective for Primary School Principal Kate Grant, who hosted a workshop on questioning children about their learning.

Her promise: No more asking the question “what did you do at school today” just to hear “nothing”; rather, easy to employ techniques that lead to real interactions about learning.

Grant's methodology for engaging conversations about learning is based not only on her vast experience as an educator (teacher, curriculum coordinator and principal), but also on research for her personal professional development. She combines [Art Costa's](#) teachings on cognitive coaching, [Bill Powell's](#) coaching questions and [Ron Richhart's](#) visible thinking research into dialogue techniques that can be used first and foremost by teachers, but also parents and students. Before diving into the details of the

techniques, keep in mind that even Kate Grant didn't perfect her questioning skills overnight! It took many unsuccessful conversations, even with her own daughters, before she was able to elicit the information she hoped for. She still works on her techniques every day, and even films her work with students in order to pinpoint precisely what to improve. Patience and practice are key!

Technique 1 – Ask a variety of open-ended questions, crafted to observe a child's knowledge, conceptual understanding or skill. The aim of any learning conversation with your child should be to discover her knowledge in a subject area, her conceptual understanding of this subject or how she might use the knowledge to take action in the world (skill).

Knowledge relates to facts. Instead of asking “what did you do at school today”, consider the following conversation starter: “**tell me about what you are learning?**” If your child can respond with facts, such as “**we are learning place value**” then you are on the right track.

Conceptual understanding means that your child can make a connection between what she is learning and the real world. Try the question: “**why might it be important to learn about place value?**” Your child could respond “**because place values are used in prices at the grocery store**” to demonstrate that she has made a link between the classroom and the world.

Skill means that the child can apply her knowledge. A great follow-up question might be “**can you explain which price is more expensive between these two: 11.95 and 1.95?**” When asking questions related to skill it is important to use verbs that ignite cognitive function, or thinking. For example, consider the following verbs: explain, identify, suggest, describe, design, compare, estimate, predict, interpret, select.

Technique 2 – Observe, listen and respond, then practice giving feedback. Interjecting, believe it or not, can sometimes bring the dialogue to a screeching halt. Try the following before speaking:

Observe your child, looking for a bio-mechanical response to your questions. Research shows that when knowledge recall is effortless, a person's eyes remain focused on their interlocutor. However, when the eyes move up and to the right after a question it means that the person is thinking deeply before answering. Look for these physical responses and let them guide your questioning; change questions and verbs until you notice that your child is really thinking.

While your child is thinking remain silent! **Waiting and staying silent** give your child the time and space she needs to think about the answer to your question. Our instinct

may be to encourage and give hints, but waiting an extra 20 seconds can lead to amazing results.

That said, waiting too long can become discouraging to a child and parents should know when to intervene. Rather than giving a child the answer, try asking her about the **strategies** she is using to answer the question. Simply asking, “**which strategies are you using to answer this question?**” can be quite powerful. If, in order to respond to the above question about price comparison, the child answers that she is trying to subtract the two, don’t hesitate to propose a new strategy by asking another question. Start your proposal question with one of these stems: **What might happen if..., how might you..., I wonder if..., maybe you might want to think about..., etc.** In this manner, you do not directly give the answer to the child, but rather encourage her to think differently.

The above stems, along with **I notice that..., it seems to me..., wow..., why did you..., how did you..., this makes me think..., I am wondering what might happen if you..., etc.**, can all be used to give **constructive feedback** to your child. Categorically indicating that a response is right or wrong, overt praise or crushing criticism do not encourage growth or the development of thinking strategies. Use more feedback questions to strengthen growth and thinking strategies, and also to prolong the conversation!

Lastly do not forget to paraphrase. **Paraphrasing** is to restate or to reword a child’s response, and can be done either up or down. **Paraphrasing up** rewords a response in a more sophisticated manner, thus giving a child new vocabulary. **Paraphrasing down** rewords a response in a simpler manner, and acts as confirmation that you as a listener have understood the answer.

Technique 3 – Always think about tone, time, place and language.

The best dialogues about learning begin with a soft and inviting tone, and take place when and where it is natural – while making dinner, walking in the park or waiting for an appointment. ISP parents, whose children learn in a largely Anglophone environment but whose families speak a number of languages, wondered in which language learning conversations should take place. The advice from Kate Grant: always in a child’s mother tongue.

Kate Grant’s workshop on engaging conversations about learning was at full capacity, and school leadership heard from students that parents had been practicing their questioning at home. Kate Grant reported that one student said to her mother “you’re acting like my teacher, all reflective!” If, as a parent, you would like to participate in the lifelong learning journey and help your children learn both at school and at home,

download the questioning toolkit or contact communications@isparis.edu to find out how you could participate in an upcoming workshop.

Toolkit:

[Question cards](#): Use these cards to start conversations. The color of the question cards is very important; sky blue was chosen as a reminder to use a welcoming tone and to practice patience in order to have the most successful conversations.

[Feedback cards](#): Once a great conversation is underway, use these cards to give feedback and to keep the conversation going. Once again, the color is very important; green symbolizes the growth that these questions are capable of launching.