 S P E E C H I N C

Teaching children to think

By Katie Pengilly MA,CCC,SLP

The current widespread closure of schools in response to the Covid-19 pandemic mitigation efforts represents a massively disruptive and devastating crisis of American, and global, education. Because even with the best resources and best of intentions, emergency remote learning does not replace the time a child has with a prepared and experienced teacher.

Schools are grappling with challenging decisions at this time, based on how to make up for potential learning losses for millions of students. Questions are circulating around what to try, and when, with specifics such as if/how to change grading policies and testing, modify curriculum and standards? How to deal with the inevitable gaps in curriculum proficiency when kids come back to school, despite remote learning, begs many questions around issues such as retention, extended school year, and longer school days.

And meanwhile now at home families are facing challenges around parents as emergency surrogate teachers. Parents are facing practical challenges such as lack of preparation. Parents are juggling multiple demands on their time such as other siblings, not to mention work from home/career demands. Parents are struggling with no or little formal training in education. Parents are challenged with technological issues around managing multiple classes and platforms, wi-fi, and shared devices. And imagine the immense challenges facing teachers who are also parents, preparing remote learning for their students while caring for and home teaching their own children simultaneously?

Being a parent right now is hard. Being a student right now is hard. Therefore home learning must contribute to, rather than take away from, the mental health of students and parents.

One possibility is to focus home learning on heightening the process of critical thinking. To view the parent as the orchestrator of the learning process, rather than an information dispenser. This can be done without increasing screen time, and without scouring the internet for resources. Home learning can be viewed as a good time to make use of spontaneous teachable moments to foster high level thinking skills and extend learning beyond memorization. The process can be applied to any activity: the curriculum, literature, current events, imaginative play, household activities, daily routines, movies and shared experiences.

Critical thinking is arguably one of the most important skills for success in life, especially in educational and professional settings. Critical thinking is a broad term which includes such skills as questioning, predicting, investigating, hypothesizing, analyzing, reflecting, revising, comparing, evaluating forming opinions.

How does a parent guide learning and teach critical thinking? Educators and therapists use the term “scaffolding”. The process can be applied to any activity, and follows 3 steps: 1. Parent asks an open ended question, 2. followed by feedback, 3. then the parent challenges or confirms the child’s thinking.

The open ended question can expose a child to the language required for sophisticated thinking and learning by incorporating the critical thinking skills listed above. “How did that happen?” (hypothesizing), “Now what are they going to do?” (predicting), or “How do you think he is feeing?” (understanding others’ perspectives). Open ended questions extend beyond the here and now, require lengthier answers, and encourage formulation of explanations and opinions. “How could he fix it?” (problem solving), “Why didn’t he like it ?” (explaining) “What do you remember about when something like that happened to you?” (comparing)

Feedback encourages shared thinking and is given via “thinking aloud comments” such as “I am thinking about \_”, “I think he must have \_”, “I predict \_”, “I wonder \_”. The parent can ask “What makes you think that?”, or simply verbalize his/her thought process from which the child can learn, and generalize the critical thinking model to other topics and situations. During this challenging time we can keep our kids engaged in the learning and thinking process in the highly supportive home environment where kids feel safe to ask questions, solve problems and engage in critical thinking.

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