

ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?

Communication with children
between four and twelve years old

Martine F. Delfos

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Are you listening to me?
Communicating with children from four to twelve years old
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Lucas Quinten
For the child to be...

*The most powerful weapon in empowering the child is adult modesty.
F. Delfos, lecture to the YMCW, Helsinki, 1999,
10th anniversary of the Children's Rights from 1989.*



COMMUNICATION WITH CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Are you listening to me? forms together with *I also have something to say!* (Not yet in English) a series of two books about communicating with children and young people. Each part focuses on the specific target group (part 1: 4 to 12; part 2: 13 to 25). The development during the period is described and the specific characteristics of conversation with children of different ages. There are many exercises that everyone can try themselves. It is suitable for training, but also proves to be a useful tool for parents in raising their children. Both books focus on the right attitude that is necessary for a good conversation with young people.

SHORT TABLE OF CONTENTS

Extensive table of contents	11
1 Introduction: are you listening to me?	15
2 Children from four to twelve years: growth and development	41
3 The conversation: respect and modesty	63
4 The conversation techniques	107
5 Conversation by age	149
6 Epilogue	157
Appendix 1 Exercises in communication	161
Appendix 2 Points of attention	169
Appendix 3 Overview of interviewing characteristics by age	177
Appendix 4 Checklist Jennings	179
List of examples	181
List of overviews	183
References	185
Information about the author	197

EXTENSIVE TABLE OF CONTENTS

Short table of contents	9
1 INTRODUCTION: ARE YOU LISTENING TO ME?	15
1.1 The dominance of language	16
1.2 Learning capacity and willingness of children	19
1.3 Reliability and suggestibility	22
1.4 Fantasy and reality	26
1.5 Differences between boys and girls	29
1.6 Question-oriented work	30
1.7 The conversation frame	32
1.8 The virtual environment	34
1.9 The structure of the book	37
Points of attention	38
2 CHILDREN FROM FOUR TO TWELVE YEARS: GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT	41
2.1 The child as a small adult	42
2.2 The psychosocial development of children aged four to six	48
2.3 The psychosocial development of children aged six to eight	52
2.4 The psychosocial development of children aged eight to ten	54
2.5 The psychosocial development of children aged ten to twelve years	57
Points of attention	60
3 THE CONVERSATION: RESPECT AND MODESTY	63
3.1 Fill in	63
3.2 Quality of a conversation	66
3.3 Communication conditions	69
3.3.1 <i>Sit at the same (eye) level as the child</i>	69
3.3.2 <i>Watch a child while you speak</i>	70
3.3.3 <i>Alternate making and not making eye contact with a child while you speak</i>	71
3.3.4 <i>Put the child at ease</i>	73
3.3.5 <i>Listen to what a child says</i>	75
3.3.6 <i>Use examples to show that what the child says has an effect</i>	79
3.3.7 <i>Tell children to tell you what they think or want, because you do not know if the child does not tell you</i>	79
3.3.8 <i>Try to combine play and talk</i>	80
3.3.9 <i>Indicate that you break off the conversation and will continue it later when you notice that the child is dropping out</i>	83

3.3.10	<i>When you have had a difficult conversation, make sure the child can afterwards come to himself</i>	83
3.4	Metacommunication	84
3.4.1	<i>Clarify the purpose of the conversation</i>	84
3.4.2	<i>Let a child know your intentions</i>	85
3.4.3	<i>Let a child know you need feedback</i>	86
3.4.4	<i>Let children know that they may keep silence</i>	86
3.4.5	<i>Try to name what you feel and follow what you feel</i>	88
3.4.6	<i>Invite the child to share his or her thoughts on the conversation</i>	88
3.4.7	<i>Make metacommunication a structural part of your communication</i>	89
3.5	The expertise of the interlocutors	90
3.6	Different interests of interlocutors	92
3.7	Loyalty	96
3.8	Language skills and closedness	97
3.9	Transference and Countertransference	100
3.10	Communication means contact	102
3.11	Children and stress management	103
	Points of attention	104
4	THE CONVERSATION TECHNIQUES	107
4.1	The structure of a conversation	107
4.1.1	<i>The preparation</i>	109
4.1.2	<i>The first step: introduce yourself</i>	112
4.1.3	<i>The introduction of the conversation frame</i>	115
4.1.4	<i>Introduction questions</i>	118
4.1.5	<i>The starting question</i>	120
4.1.6	<i>The fuselage</i>	121
4.1.7	<i>The completion</i>	123
4.2	Questioning techniques	127
4.2.1	<i>Open and closed questions</i>	130
4.2.2	<i>Display questions</i>	131
4.2.3	<i>Rhetorical questions</i>	131
4.2.4	<i>Probing questions</i>	132
4.2.5	<i>Suggestive questions</i>	135
4.2.6	<i>Multiple questions</i>	136
4.2.7	<i>Repeat or clarify question</i>	137
4.2.8	<i>Contrary questions</i>	138
4.2.9	<i>Why questions</i>	138
4.2.10	<i>Repeat or summarize answer</i>	138
4.2.11	<i>Summary questions</i>	139
4.3	The experience	140

4.4	Body language	141
4.4.1	<i>Body posture</i>	142
4.4.2	<i>The use of the voice</i>	142
4.5	General attitude	144
4.6	Metacommunication as a means of repair	144
	Points of attention	145
5	CONVERSATION BY AGE	149
5.1	Estimating a child's mental age level	149
5.2	Conversation with children from four to six years old	150
5.3	Conversation with children from six to eight years old	152
5.4	Conversation with children from eight to ten years old	153
5.5	Conversation with children from ten to twelve years old	154
	Points of attention	155
6	EPILOGUE	157
	Appendix 1 Exercises in communication	161
	Appendix 2 Points of attention	169
	Appendix 3 Overview of interviewing characteristics by age	177
	Appendix 4 Checklist Jennings	179
	List of examples	181
	List of overviews	183
	References	185
	Information about the author	197



BOSS HUGO BOSS

BOSS
HUGO BOSS

1 INTRODUCTION

Are you listening to me?

Are you listening to me!? Children have heard it so many times, a question often in a firm and stern tone by adults. But inside children often think: But are you listening to me?! And they are right. While children have a reputation for not listening to adults, the reverse is also true. Adults often do not listen to what children say either. However, the adult's question is usually a request for obedience, the child's a plea that his or her story be listened to.

The start of learning to communicate with children is in fact very simple: the attitude.

Everyone has been a child, and most people talk every day to children if not every week, nevertheless it is often difficult to really communicate with children. There is hardly any literature on communicating with children, and certainly not with young children. Little or no scientific research has been done. What there is, focuses mainly on the difference in communication between adults and children. Little attention is paid to how adults and children talk to each other and how they can communicate based on their possibilities and impossibilities. In a review of research about listening to children, Clark (2005) states that little research has been done about interrogating children, but that what emerges from it, is that it is important to consider the difference when communicating with children, in their perspective, interests and needs at different ages. In the meantime, more and more attention has been paid to the child. *The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child* is about ten years old at the beginning of the twenty-first century (CRC, 1989). Attention is increasingly focused on the child. Given the increasing interest in the opinion of the child, some research is beginning to emerge on how survey surveys involving questionnaires and interviews with children should be conducted (Borgers et al., 1999). Partly because of the *Convention of the Rights of the Child*, attention is being paid to the participation of children in scientific research. Punch (2002) shows that scientific research with children differs from that with adults and shows seven methodological bottlenecks. The main problem is that the view on children is an adults view rather than that of children themselves. The right of children to participate in scientific research is examined to fit by the requirements of the ethics committee that assesses whether research is not in any way harmful for children (Powell & Smith, 2009). Conroy and Harcourt (2009) discuss how sensitive it is of asking young children for permission to participate in research. For example, their consent may only cover the very near future and parents sometimes give consent where children themselves would not, or vice versa. It is necessary to adopt a child-centered perspective (Grover, 2004). The opportunity to participate in scientific research is not unrelated to the attitude towards children in general. Sinclair (2004) indicates that participation of children in scientific research is only possible when it is embed-

ded in the relationship with children in general. In order to make it possible to have children participate in research, one must realize that children are aware when adults act on an equal footing with children. In everyday life, children experience the power relations between children and adults (Christensen, 2004).

Speaking with children is a daily activity for almost everyone, at least during part of his or her life. For professionals who work with children, it is even a core activity. Nevertheless, we often are taught little about it in training courses, and we have to draw our knowledge mainly from our own experience and that of the people around us. In books on developmental psychology, the attention given to it is limited; in favorable cases, a page or two at the most. Specific attention to open conversations with children – the central subject of this book – is even scarcer. Most of the research is about communicating with children in interrogation situations and for testimonies.

1.1 THE DOMINANCE OF LANGUAGE

The younger the child, the more awkward adults seem to feel when talking to children (exercise 1.1, appendix 1). Especially when it comes to difficult or painful subjects. This is no less true for the child. The younger the child, the stranger communication with adults is often for him or her. It starts from birth. Babies are not born with language, but they are born with the possibility of language (Chomsky, 1957; Kegl et al., 1999). Soon a baby realizes that an adult does not understand enough if it is not expressed in words. Without this being explained, the baby understands that he or she will have to learn what the jumble of sounds that adults produce means, and the baby tries to teach itself a language. A baby even knows how to make an abstraction of different sounds that belong to the same sound system but are pronounced by different people. Groups of sounds such as ‘eating’ or ‘outside’ spoken by several people in different voices are recognized as the same concept. The baby knows from this, completely independently with only light encouragement from children and adults around the baby and without being given rules, to develop a vocabulary, a wealth of meaning and a grammar. If it hears different kinds of sounds, it will group them as separate languages, ‘eat’ and ‘outside’ together and ‘manger’ and ‘dehors’ in another group. For example, in this example the child unconsciously makes ‘Dutch’ and ‘French.’ When a child is taught several languages, two or even three, in principle it will learn all of them.

■ *James, who is seven months old, smiles benevolently at me while I address him in Dutch. When I, as a bilingual, switch to French, he starts crowing with delight. He hears that something new is happening and he is thrilled about it, as babies are excited about new things. I have had this experience many times with babies.* ■

But not everyone has the same linguistic talents and not everyone is offered the same opportunities to develop language. There are differences between boys and girls (Delfos, 2018). Language development in boys is often slower (Rutter & Rutter, 1993; Delfos, 2018). Children are particularly sensitive to their environment and understand situations long before words are involved (Donaldson, 1979). They therefore receive the words from their environment from this sensitivity to situations and link their understanding of the situation to the words they hear. For children, especially young children, images are very important and have great communicative value. Cook and Hess (2007) show that photographs taken by children can be meaningful. Photos that children take are not static, have more meaning for the children themselves and the adults who view them. They can give an idea of the child's own perspective in a certain context at a certain time. In all languages, children initially make mistakes that they produce themselves and that they have not been taught. Errors that arise from their ability to abstract, whether it is an intelligent child or a child with less strong intellectual abilities. They say 'I runned' as a 'perfect' conjugation from a grammatical understanding (over-regularizing) (De Villiers & De Villiers, 1999; Stemberger, 2004), while no adult has taught him or her this. On the contrary, when the child makes such a mistake, the adult corrects the child and tells him to say: 'I ran.' At that point, the child learns that the verb 'to run' is an exception to the rule. Then the child says 'I ran' from now on and applies this to the whole verb and other verbs that are an exception to the conjugation rules (Rousseau, 1726/1957; Chomsky, 1975). We see how great this achievement is when adult foreigners have to learn the different foreign language where there are no conjugations of verbs, which is the case for almost all non-Western languages. These foreigners stubbornly say 'I am listen, because verbs such as listen' are not conjugated in their mother tongue and they have the greatest difficulty in learning how to conjugate verbs in the new language. When learning a new language as an adult, it is rare to master the new language fluently.

■ *In 1979, Vietnamese boat refugees came to the Netherlands. They work hard at school to master the Dutch language. But they think it's very strange: 'Martine, why do you say one chair, two chairs with an extra s? Surely it is clear that there is more than one? Why do you say: I bring, she brings? It is clear, it is about 'bring'. And why do you say I ran, when you say 'yesterday' it is clear, then you do not have to say 'ran'. A fresh look at your language. There are more words in Vietnamese that deal with human relations and feelings. They find it strange that one could say: I love 'potatoes,' because love is for living creatures and not for plants. Which language is rich, do you think? (Exercise 1.2, appendix 1). ■*

There is a language-sensitive period (Montessori, 2018) during which the child is language-oriented and learns to master this language fluently. This period extends from birth to about seven years; then there is a sensitive period for refining the language, especially grammar and a sensitive period for learning to read and write,

from about seven to ten years old. Kegl has shown that young deaf children who grow up together develop a full-fledged, grammatical sign language together. This is in contrast to deaf people who only started living together when they were adolescents. They only develop a vocabulary in the form of gestures without grammar (Kegl et al., 1999).

The capacity to learn to communicate using language is enormous, but it must be given the opportunity to be developed. Adults often make the mistake that when a child is able to pronounce the words of a language, the child is also able to formulate the questions about subjects that concern him or her. This is certainly not the case until about ten years old. For example, because of their lack of being able to put into words what they want to ask, children can ask *repeat questions*, that is, repeating the same question. Adults often interpret this behavior as inattentiveness and respond by saying that they have already answered, and that the child should listen. A child who asks the same question over and over again may be a child who listens poorly. But it will more often be a child who tries to achieve a certain answer without being able to formulate the right question.

■ *Emma is four, she is very interested in baby Oliver at the neighbors. Every time she asks: Will Oliver get the bottle? She repeats that question daily and gets the answer that Oliver gets the bottle. Until the neighbor suddenly realizes that Emma might want to ask something completely different. She asks: Do you want to give Oliver the bottle? Emma sighs with relief: "Yes!"* ■

Even though the child gets an elaborate answer, the child repeats the question hoping to get the desired answer. Repetitive questions are common up to the age of eight. Children are not yet able to shape a conversation properly according to the rules that adults use. For example, concise formulation is a rule that many adults use implicitly, while this is hardly feasible for children. Often without being aware of this, adults break down many of children's initiatives for conversation. They often take too little time to let the child express what it wants to say and take over the conversation (Van Haaren, 1983). 'Wait a minute' is on the tongue of the adult (exercise 1.3, appendix 1). Van Haaren argues that conversations with children reflect the degree of creativity of adults. Communication with children requires playfulness and breaking free from fixed patterns. Talking to children also requires unlearning the powerlessness and fear to participate in fantasies, dreams, symbols, ideas, and feelings, says Van Haaren. It means unlearning rigidity and the performance drive to standardize, interpret, win, and compete.

If you look at toddlers who do not yet speak, you can see from their behavior that they understand an incredible amount of language. Understanding the language is always far ahead of its production. The active vocabulary - the number of words the child uses - is nowhere near reflecting the passive vocabulary - the number of words the child knows and understands. For example, there is a 5-month delay between a

child's comprehension of 50 words (at 13 months) and being able to produce 50 words (at 18 months) (Menyuk et al., 1995). Boys lag behind girls in early vocabulary (Reznick & Goldfield, 1992).

■ *Marec, an almost two-year-old child of political refugees, was suddenly separated from his parents and hospitalized in a completely different language environment. His parents were not allowed to go to the hospital; there was no family. During the first few days Marec still uttered some sounds that came from his own language. When there was no response, because the sounds were not understood, the child no longer took the initiative to express himself linguistically and only repeated words that he heard around him. No matter how young the child was, it was unerringly aware that its own language system was not applicable, and it devoted itself to learning the new language.* ■

Adults rarely take the child's perspective. Good communication is particularly important in hospital situations (Capjon & Bjørk, 2010). It is often moving and comical to see how the toddler, who himself understands perfectly what the other is saying, can become distraught with rage and clench his fists in restrained passion, when he himself is unable to produce the language necessary to make sure the adult understands him. In fact, tantrums and hitting other children decrease in many children from about the age of three. So, from the moment on, they can make themselves somewhat understood.

1.2 LEARNING CAPACITY AND WILLINGNESS OF CHILDREN

Maria Montessori (2018) argues that adults should show more respect for the child who manages to develop a language system all by himself. She says there is a lack of respect in the way adults at school offer the child the alphabet as a huge treat. They want to teach the child this, completely ignoring the colossal own learning capacity of the child who has already learned a language independently. From scratch on, the child has already mastered a large part of the phonology, semantics, grammar and pragmatics of the language before entering school (Berk, 2003). Children's willingness to learn is also enormous. Young children, in particular, are willing to venture into new areas if they are given the opportunity to do so. This varies from learning a language to learning how to swing, from potty training to arithmetic and from washing dishes to operating a computer.

■ *Four-year-old Benjamin, who was still wetting the bed, was suggested to start potty training at night. He responded very benevolently and said: "Just tell me how to do it and I will do it". His mother was very surprised by this answer and could not answer. "How do you want me to learn, if you can't explain it to me?" was Benjamin's response.* ■

In fact, children enjoy learning so much that they become absorbed in it and forget their surroundings. When they then master something, *normalization* sets in (Montessori, 2018), the feeling of completely coming back to oneself. They look around them and become aware again of a world from which they were closed off for a while. Young children are much less attached to certain patterns. They are quite capable of approaching things from different perspectives and approach the world less prejudiced than adults.

▣ *A nice example of the (distorted) formation of memory by bias is the study of Allport and Postman (1947). They showed children and adults two pictures of men, a black man and a white man. The white man had a knife in his hand. Children generally remembered correctly that the white man had a knife; the adults named the black man as the one holding the knife.* ▣

The young child perceives mainly with his or her senses, especially through the sense of smell and touch. Experiences are not, or hardly put down in words. The young child is also biologically equipped differently than the adult. For example, the child 'looks' with its mouth and therefore has more tactile buttons in its mouth than an adult. The young child has an essentially different form of perception, a form that the adult hardly knows anymore (Schachtel, 1973). Childhood experiences are therefore more likely to be evoked by smell or touch and not easily expressed in language. Cook and Hess (2007) give another reason why childhood memories are so difficult to access: while childhood is something common to all humans, the child within each of us tends to be buried by the conventions of adult socialization.

The human baby is born 'too early' and continues to mature for some thirty years after birth (Gesell and Ilg, 1949; Tanner, 1990). Partly to leave room for this, but also to allow the skull to fold up during birth, an opening has been left at the top of the skull, called the *fontanelle*, which only closes after one to two years. The maturation process means that there is not yet an integrated form of perception, as in adults. For example, the left and right hemispheres still function very independently until about seven years of age, the *hinge age* (Delfos, 2020b). The experiences are stored in fragments of smell, color and otherwise, in different areas of the brain, with few connections between them. The integration of the cerebral hemispheres takes about seven years to complete, when a change in the gene pattern also becomes visible (Fulker et al., 1993).

When children grow up, they notice that adults have a fixed, linguistic way of describing the world and there is great pressure on children to adapt to this, Schachtel argues (1973). Deviating from the norm evokes fear in the older child, but also in adults. This creates a drive for adjustment. As a result, the child will express itself more and more linguistically, because the adult asks him or her to do so. There is a wide range of communication options, with smell perhaps being one of the most important – inconscient – drives of our behavior, yet adults tend to limit themselves