

CHAPTER 2

Do Skill Boosting Conversations Really Make a Difference?

Skill Boosting Conversations (SBC) make significant differences on many levels. Those effects can be more easily understood by comparing this type of conversation to the more traditional skill teaching process. By skill teaching, I mean the common way in which well-intentioned adults ask questions about “problems” or conflicts, tell young people what they should have done, why they shouldn’t have done what they did, or discuss all the consequences that follow from their questionable choice. Once again I would like to underscore that this teaching is usually done from a place of caring about the young person and wanting to do our job as adults to “educate,” “counsel,” or “help” those under our care. SBC offer another way of fostering growth that can often better accomplish our goal. In the sections that follow, I will contrast skill teaching to skill boosting on the:

1. Conversational process (who’s describing what happened, whose knowledge is given higher value, which emotions are involved, recent brain research)
2. Implications for young people’s sense of self (self-worth, self-confidence, logical thinking, responsibility, and response-ability)
3. Effects on young people’s attitude towards others (empathy, awareness of others’ intention and goals, awareness of context, helpfulness)
4. Effects on the adult-youth relationship (power, intimacy, appreciation, and trust)

Conversational process

The act of putting words to experiences

Putting words to experiences and speaking them articulates thoughts that would otherwise remain blurry. There is even evidence from neuroscience that this process of labeling experiences balances the activity of the left and right hemispheres in a way that allows for a better integration of the experience (Siegel, 2007).

In skill teaching conversations, young people often find themselves defending what they did, i.e. the problem behavior. In our chapter 1 stories, for example, if questioned, lectured or punished, the river-exploring boys would likely have defended themselves by explaining how they weren’t paying attention and just went from one part of the river to another without realizing what they were doing. Their carelessness and inattentiveness would have been the focus of attention, leaving them feeling rather foolish. In our second story, if Sam had been confronted by a teacher, parent or counselor, he would have been forced to justify how mean Eva had been and how upset he was, which may simply have heightened the anger and the animosity between the two students. In story number 3, had she been challenged by adults, Shelly would have justified why she ran away, become increasingly clear about and committed to her reasons, and further connect to the unhappiness of her situation. This would leave her more than ever tempted to run away again.

In many situations (not all obviously), a teaching attitude inadvertently worsens the actual problem and leaves young people less able to make better choices in the future.

In SBC, as was illustrated in the earlier transcripts, young people articulate the useful thoughts that simmered in their minds. In this process they revisit the event and automatically reconsolidate its memory, enriching it with problem-solving strategies and increased positive emotions. A memory is simply a group of neurons firing together. When we activate this network of firing neurons (the memory of a successful event) and talk about it in a skill boosting way, new neurons are co-activated and automatically associated with the original memory (Fields, 2005). As a result, when it goes back into storage in the brain, the original memory becomes infused with an experience of agency and positive emotions. Progressively, with repetitive SBC, young people are changing the scenery of their brains where problematic situations may yet maintain some of their unpleasant charge, but they are mediated by an experience of skills and competency.

Knowledge

In traditional skill teaching conversations, adults often do a lot of the talking and young people are expected more or less to listen. Adults generate questions, ideas, solutions, teach a skill and explain what is problematic in what they see. They base the conversation on what they saw or what other observers told them. Usually adults will try to influence the young person not to do this again or to choose a different behavior...The young person becomes a passive recipient of the adult's thoughts about the event.

Inadvertently, these talks can also become fundamentally intellectual and disconnected from what it's really like to walk in the young person's shoes. Many young people will report, for example, that they got in trouble because they were not "respectful." When asked what being "respectful" means, they often don't really know, even if the adult explained the issue over and over again! There's a mismatch in language and thinking process that is difficult to bridge partly because the brains of adults and youth are fairly different and don't process information in the same way (Bjork & al, 2004), and partly because there is a lot that we adults don't see.

In SBC the starting point is the young people's own experience of events. They are the only ones who really know what happened and what shaped their responses. They certainly are the only ones who have access to what happened in their minds and hearts, what they were thinking and feeling, and what they were paying attention to. Very often they are the ones to know about the details of the history between themselves and the person with whom they had conflict, as in the story of Sam and his "well-known enemy".

Conversational possibilities are much broader as young people actively reveal information that could never have been guessed by adults. This occurred for example in the story of Mike, regarding his friend's idea of coming back a different way. Young people are the bearers of knowledge about their own experience. Adults only facilitate an exploration of what took place and uncover ideas or thoughts that contributed to the successful unfolding of the solution.

Most young people, and frankly many adults, will experience a complex jumble of thoughts and feelings, and respond with little awareness of what exactly transpired so successfully. In fact,

research has shown that a person can speak at a rate of 160 words per minute while the brain is actually able to process about 800 words per minute (Joesting & al., 1996). A lot of important invisible activity is happening in the brain that is unseen to observers and not necessarily even known to the brain's owner! This is where adults can be most helpful: in unraveling piece by piece the components of the successful problem-solving *experience*. In that sense, the starting point of the learning process is experiential in nature.

Brain relevance

In skill teaching conversations, adults attempt to “implant” new behaviors and thoughts into young people's brain. While this form of teaching may, at times, be unavoidable and even necessary, its success is necessarily limited because it doesn't give us the same level of access to the brain's natural learning powers. Studies show that after three days young people retain only an average of 10% of what was taught in a lecture style (Moore, 2005). As we discussed earlier, skill teaching is limited in scope by virtue of the intellectual nature of the material, the neutral or uncomfortable emotions triggered and the limited interest of the young person.

The brain is fundamentally an experience-encoding device (Siegel, 1999). It is designed to sort, understand, memorize, and learn from *what we live*, and this is particularly true for young people, for whom the frontal cortex is not fully developed. In general, the brain encodes a lot more than we are aware of. You can be in a restaurant, for example, and not pay attention to the fact that the person at the next table is reading a book. Yet prompted skillfully about it at a later time, you would be able to remember that detail.

A classic study conducted by National Training Laboratories found that we remember 10-20% of what we hear, 30% of what we see demonstrated, 50% of what we discuss and 75% of what we experience, practice, or teach (National Training Laboratories of Bethel, 1960). Imagine the incredible amount of details the brain encodes with each second of lived experience! A very complex and rich web of electrical firing retrieves past memories, creates new ones, links emotions and thoughts, analyzes sensory inputs and outputs, makes assumptions, and creates responses. Why cultivate skills with any other material than what's already richly encoded *in the brain*?

In Mike's story again, the discussion involving his own lived experience of concern regarding the possibility of being lost will be encoded in his memory and remembered much more fully than any lecture on safety a parent could have given upon his return. The best possible conversational material is right there in the very thinking of the young person's brain. Mike made some valuable decisions and was at least partially successful at solving his problem, leaving a canvas of experience in the form of a neural pathway. The next step is to connect and enrich this existing neural pathway with higher cortical functions such as meta-thinking (thinking about your thinking), awareness of self, others, context, and to make meaning of what happened in a future, usable way.

In sum, as indicated in the table below, SBC is associated with a much greater learning potential.

Table 2.1: Summary of the conversational process

	Skill Boosting Conversations focus on success	Skill Teaching Conversations focus on problem
What is articulated	The helpful skills	The problem
Who's knowledgeable	The young person	The adult
Type of knowledge	Experiential	Intellectual
Participation level in the conversation	Young person is generally actively contributing	Young person is more or less passive or defensive
Focus	Assets	Deficits
Content	The invisible thought process (cannot be seen)	The visible behavior or action (what was seen)
Interest in conversation	Moderate to High	Minimal to Moderate
Conversation possibilities	Rich with unexpected details being added	Thin or limited in scope by the focus of the adult
Brain relevance	Existing neural pattern reinforced in powerful ways	Requires working to create a new neural network
Connection to life experience	Maximized as the incident is relevant to personal life	Minimal to moderate as the discussion may feel irrelevant
Emotion	Positive	Negative or neutral

2. Effects on the young person's sense of self

Effects on self-worth

In traditional skill teaching conversations, young people are far more vulnerable to feeling uncomfortable or incompetent. In the name of learning, they are forced to put their nose in the worst aspects of their actions. Because the adults do not notice their efforts and successes, these young people can end up attributing their problems to internal deficiencies and seeing their successes as being the results of luck (Dweck, 2005). Such explanatory style has been associated with a tendency toward depression and helplessness later in life (Seligman, 2002).

By giving attention to these skills, by noticing them and valuing them, SBC help children and adolescents attribute their successes to their abilities. Since young people see themselves through

others' eyes (White & Epston, 1990), being appreciated by an adult for their clever thinking invariably gives them a profound sense of self-worth. This was the case, for example, in Sam's story, where he ended up determining that he had been "mature" and "liked it." The adult's simple act of acknowledging, validating and helping him recognize this preferred way of being had a big impact.

In some of these conversations, young people are also placed in the position of actually sharing these skills with those who are interested or who can benefit from them. This was the case for Shelly when she was invited to share some of her helpful ideas with her little brother. As discussed earlier, explaining one's skills to another can be a powerful experience for young people and is another proof that their ideas are worthy.

Effects on self-confidence

By contrast, skill teaching conversations can leave young people feeling embarrassed and incompetent. These uncomfortable states make it more difficult to take the risk of trying out the new behaviors suggested by adults. This would be particularly true in situations of conflict where young people's brain are infused with intense emotions such as anger or hurt which automatically reduces their frontal lobe's ability to recall intellectual teachings. (Sousa, 2006).

One of the more striking outcomes of SBC is that young people become very articulate about the specific skills that serve them best. They are able to name them, know first-hand how they personally engage in them, have a deep understanding of why and how they work, and believe in their ability to be successful using these skills. Young people's deep awareness of having mastered these powerful skills, allows them to be more confident in tackling challenging situations. Their perception of their ability is heightened and they are more able to be calm when facing challenges. They become more response-able, that is, able to respond in a constructive manner (Covey, 2004). Sam, for example, now knows that he can be upset at his "class enemy" and still behave in the "mature" way he prefers.

Effects on self-reflection

Another characteristic of skill teaching conversations is that it does little to encourage self-reflection, and even when it does, it's usually confined in intellectually structured framework. For example, children can be taught to make "I statements" (instead of "you hurt me," they might be asked to say, "I was hurt when ..."), which require them to rephrase what they said using language in which they take responsibility for their own feelings instead of blaming. While this may be useful to highlight a constructive phraseology, it usually has a limited impact on their ability to self-reflect and is unlikely to be remembered during a heated conflict. As mentioned earlier, when intense emotions are present, the significantly reduced activity of the frontal lobe inhibits the recall of intellectual lessons.

SBC's starting point is self-reflection. Young people are constantly invited to notice and examine the thinking involved in their successes. Since the process is rooted in positive emotions, young people appreciate the experience and eventually start engaging in self-reflection on their own. Being able to "see" what is arising in one's mind builds many of the same skills developed by mindfulness meditation practitioners, such as insight and awareness (Wallace, 2007). Such skills have been shown to enable the development of the middle prefrontal regions

and insular cortex, promoting self-regulatory and executive functions of the brain (Lazar, et al., 2005). As well stated by Daniel Siegel (2007, p.266), “With reflection, students are offered a neural capacity to socially, emotionally, and academically approach life with resilience. What a gift for a healthy development”.

Effects on ability to think of consequences

Adults tend to invite young people to think of the consequences of their behaviors only when they make mistakes. As discussed earlier, because of the way our brains are wired, such learning is often biologically hampered by the presence of uncomfortable emotions such as defensiveness, anger or fear of punishment (LeDoux, 1996).

In contrast, SBC, focusing as it does on helpful thinking or successful actions (as will be discussed in the next chapter), offer particularly fertile grounds for highlighting the rippling effects of one’s choice. Young people may even rejoice in thinking about all of the positive effects that their choice had. In fact the more positive effects, the more excitement and pride at having accomplished *all* of that! In the meantime various categories of effects can be explored, such as effects on self, other people, relationship to other people, how they see you, the unfolding events of the day, the amount of fun, your access to privileges, etc.

Mike had just such an opportunity to consider consequences when he thought of the implications of getting lost in the forest. The conversation made visible the specific categories of consequences (effects on one’s emotions, health, relationships, etc...) to make them more easily memorable. While many other categories of consequences could have been explored, it didn’t seem necessary in that context.

With each conversation, various categories of consequences become more and more practiced and programmed in the brain. In fact, young people who have participated in SBC have been shown to develop an ability to think of consequences that goes beyond what is deemed possible by many neurologists and developmental psychologists.

Responsibility and response-ability

Responsibility is generally defined as the ability to think and act in a reliable and accountable way. Covey (2004) has expanded this general view to highlight that a truly responsible person is actually “response-able” meaning capable of making decisions informed by an awareness of self, others, and possibilities. As discussed earlier, in the traditional skill teaching conversations, young people often do not fully integrate the intellectual lessons adults are trying to teach them. They may feel inadequate, unskilled and one down in a hierarchical relationship with adults. If they make a mistake, it can be tempting to hide it, especially if they sense a potential consequence or anticipate an uncomfortable conversation. Instead of becoming more responsible, these children and adolescents will often end up worried about displeasing adults. The discomfort of both being instructed to do something one doesn’t totally get and the sense of being inadequate reduces the likelihood of being aware of oneself, others, and creative possibilities. The brain becomes mostly preoccupied with shutting down uncomfortable feelings and protecting oneself (Damasio, 1994).

When young people are regularly engaged in the process of exploring their own successes, they tend to cultivate and expand a triple awareness of self, others, and possibilities. The satisfaction they gain by skillfully resolving problems further motivates them to continue acting in ways that lead to positive outcomes. In this process, young people become more and more committed to engaging with others in personally and socially appreciated ways. They become more responsible and response-able. At the same time, the adults in their lives, having witnessed and appreciated the thinking process of such young people, are more likely to consider them reliable and accountable. Again, because young people tend to see themselves through other people's eyes, experiencing the positive response from adults confirms their feeling of competency and abilities to be responsible.

In sum, SBC is associated with a more complex set of learning outcomes, as indicated in the table below.

Table 2.2: Summary of implications on experience of self

	Skill Boosting Conversations focus on success	Skill Teaching Conversations focus on problem
Effects on self-worth	Young people feel more capable and competent	Young people feel inadequate, unskilled, having to learn
Effects on self-confidence	Boosts it	Diminishes it
Effects on self-reflection	Enhanced and appreciated	Limited and structured
Improvement in problem solving skills	Young people are more articulate in strategies that are a good fit for them	Need to practice, may not succeed in applying an intellectual concept at a high emotional time
Commitment to using the strategy	Maximized, as young people know their strategies work, trust that they can do it and are more committed to it because it is their idea	Minimized, as young people may be unsure if it'll work and may not fully understand how to do it

(continued)	Skill Boosting Conversations focus on success	Skill Teaching Conversations focus on problem
Effects on ability to notice the consequences of choices	High	Low
Effects on responsibility	Able to think and act in a more reliable way	Young people may attempt to hide their mistakes
Effects on response-ability	Increased as young people notice over and over again their abilities and learn to trust themselves	Young people often do not feel better equipped to respond

3. Effects on the attitude toward others

Empathy and awareness of others' feelings

Many adults resent or become angry at young people's seeming inability to experience compassion for others' feelings, especially when a conflict occurs. Attempting to teach young people to understand and feel the suffering of another young person, especially during a conflict, is often quite a losing battle. Moreover, forcing young people to apologize against their will only feeds their resentment and sabotages the genuine regrets that may come later. In such situations, empathy for the other person is usually blocked by the young person's own negative experience. It should be said that in more neutral situations, young people who are developmentally ready can experience empathy, although it may be biased by some self-centeredness (Eisenberg & Morris, 2004).

In SBC, the adult invites the young person to examine what she spontaneously notices about others. This exploration will often extend into an increasingly complex observation of others' thoughts, feelings, and contexts. In other words, young people first discover their own awareness of others and then are progressively encouraged to pay attention to different aspects of others' experiences. Once again this strengthens the brain's neural pathway for empathy in a way that suits the person's unique developmental level.

Awareness of others' intentions and goals

Very often, when adults wish to discuss a conflict, the young people involved will typically claim that the other did it "on purpose" or because they're "mean!" It can be very difficult to convince them to consider any other hypothesis or to teach them to have a broader perspective. The anger and resentment they experienced is effectively blocking their neural capacity to "put themselves in the other person's shoes."

For this reason, it can be extremely valuable to use SBC to get young people to examine the more constructive hypotheses they generate about other people’s intentions when they have successfully solved a social dilemma. We’ll discuss using SBC about situations that are 100% successful in our next chapter. Those types of conversations are very useful to expand the young person’s perspective on others’ point of view and intentions. This process is facilitated by the positive feelings experienced and a greater openness to thinking about others, which provide the young person with a broader repertoire of possibilities for understanding human behavior.

Awareness of context

Skill teaching conversations tend to focus mainly on behaviors and ignore context. As we will see later in this book, an understanding of context is essential to solve problems, and foster compassion in many social interactions (Beaudoin & Taylor, 2009). It is quite simple to introduce considerations of context into SBC.

Helpfulness

Helpfulness and altruism are two virtues often emphasized, both in religious institutions and at school. When adults overly demand helpfulness, however (e.g., “you should help your parents with the dishes,” “can’t you see your little brother needs help?” etc.), it can be experienced as a burden, as something you do to please others or because you have to. Any personal satisfaction the young person might get from having contributed to the life of another is thereby erased.

In SBC young people get to notice times when they actually chose to help, why they did that, and the effects it had on themselves and others. Interestingly, young people also develop the skills to facilitate SBC themselves and start doing SBC, on their own, with their friends! Having the experience of being valued and supported through conversations, provides them with the intimate knowledge and skills to help and support others during hard times.

In sum, SBC enhances young people’s ability to relate constructively to others in a variety of ways.

Table 2.3: Summary of effects on attitude towards others

	Skill Boosting Conversations focus on success	Skill Teaching Conversations focus on problem
Empathy and awareness of others’ feelings	High, as young people are calm and receptive	Low, as young people are filled with their own emotions
Awareness of others’ intentions and goals	High, as the positive emotions and safety embedded in the discussion make it possible to speculate	Low, as young people often assume the other intentionally wanted to cause problems and anger blocks other views
Awareness of	Maximized	Minimized

others' context of life		
Helpfulness toward others	High, as the person is more self-motivated and aware of the satisfaction experienced when helping their peers	Low, as helpfulness is experienced as a " <i>should</i> "; a smaller repertoire of skills is developed in relation to helping others

4. Effects on the adult-youth relationship

Distribution of power

One of the remarkable differences between talking to young people about problems vs. talking about successes has to do with the power relationship between an adult and young person (Freedman, Epston & Lobovits, 1997). In a problem-focused conversation (or even in a more neutral social skill training setting), the adult is usually trying to influence the young person to engage in or understand certain skills that the adult deems important. This exchange is, by its very nature, hierarchical.

When the conversation between adult and young person is centered on exploring a success, the relationship is more egalitarian and collaborative (White, 2007). The young person holds the knowledge, and all parties are intrigued and learning together in a reciprocal exchange (Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1996). This becomes particularly evident if this process is facilitated with a group of young people all contributing their hypotheses and ideas.

Connectedness and appreciation

Conversations about successes are exciting and tend to leave all participants feeling intimately connected and appreciative of the shared journey. In a traditional teaching conversations, that sense of connectedness and intimacy will vary greatly depending on the relationship with the adult.

Trust

In traditional teaching conversations, trust tends to be fairly fragile. In SBC, where successes and appreciations are woven into the very fabric of the exchange, trust is naturally enhanced.

Table 2.4: Summary of effects on the adult-child relationship

	Skill Boosting Conversations focus on success	Skill Teaching Conversations focus on problem
Distribution of power	More equal and collaborative	Hierarchical
Appreciation	Rich and bi-directional	Varies greatly depending on the way the adult is teaching
Connectedness	High	Varies greatly
Trust	High	Low to high

Questions and answers

Question. I can see how SBC can be very powerful on many levels, but don't you think that for some subjects, plain teaching can really have its place in getting kids to think more?

Answer. SBC apply mostly to skills of living and ability to think, not to academics (although most subjects *can* be taught in engaging and fun ways). Even if you are a teacher in a classroom setting, however, you will still have plenty of opportunities to use SBC, especially when teaching life skills. Sometimes we are so busy trying to implant our own ideas in young people's brains that we forget to first look at what's already there. It can be helpful to remember that young people have an attention span about equivalent in minutes to their age in years when it comes to passively listening (Tileston, 2004). Teaching anything, then, often has to be done in small chunks in order to sustain the complete attention of the young person.

Question. I'm not sure about all of this. If people solved a problem once, can't they just solve it again with or without SBC?

Answer. I make a distinction between skills that are very situation specific and those that are repeatable. Consider the experience of, say, a man who was assaulted on the street and fought with all his might and successfully protected himself. Is this person in good shape to protect himself as well the next time? Not necessarily. He will most likely think he was lucky to get away and may even feel shaken and more vulnerable even though he was successful. Now imagine that I was to review with this person all the details of what he did well, how he kicked, punched, move around the assailant, slipped away, noticed his weaknesses, envisioned several potential escape and tricked him. Would he be in a better position to defend himself next time? Absolutely, especially if we justified, enriched, and connected his actions to his history of being an athlete and an emergency room physician.

Knowing exactly what he did well and why would transform his experience of the incident and his perception of his abilities in self-defense. He would be in a much better position to repeat the accomplishment if faced with this unfortunate situation again. Without such conversation however, he might be expected to react more from a place of fear and powerlessness and less able to protect himself if he were ever to face this situation again. SBC with people who have experienced trauma will be discussed further at a later time.

Question. SBC sounds fascinating but I don't fully get it. If kids are so good at thinking of helpful solutions, why in the world don't they simply just use them in the first place??

Answer. We tend to believe that behaviors are a reflection of people's thought process and intentions. Often, this is not the case either for adults or children. For example, how many women have the intentions of changing their eating patterns but don't actually do it? How many men want to be more involved and more patient with their children and fail over and over again? Motivation and the deep desire to do something is not always sufficient. We often need a little boost from someone supportive and an awareness of the tools we have with which to accomplish our goals.

It's the same thing for young people. In fact scientists used to believe that young people were doomed to be more directed by their emotions than their thoughts. Until recently, it was believed that they could not control their emotions very well because MRI studies showed that the amygdala, the center for fight-or-flight emotions, developed much earlier than the frontal cortex, which is responsible for impulse control (Papalia, Wendkos Olds & Duskin Feldman, 2008). Recently, some fascinating research has demonstrated that the brains of people involved in more reflective and contemplative processes displayed a brain development pattern different from that of the average American (for a review of the literature see Begley, 2007). Specifically, people who engaged in extensive daily meditation and conscious breathing had greater frontal lobe development than the average person. This exciting finding proves that we *can* reshape our brains through conscious mental activity.