



Save the Science Lessons, Einstein

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As adults, we often find ourselves in situations calling for “conversation starters.” Maybe you’re at your spouse’s work holiday party, or entertaining clients at lunch, or even just killing time on the phone waiting for your colleagues to join the conference call. Since having children, however, I’ve noticed my need for conversation starters has declined and, in fact, been replaced entirely by my boys providing “conversation enders.” They can silence an entire table of people with one casual but well-placed comment. Often they’re not even in the room but still elicit the same effect: Quietly yet clearly heard from upstairs: “Hey, this is weird. Mom’s makeup doesn’t come out when I squeeze it.”

A conversation ender is any comment, intentional or not, that successfully shuts down a conversation and renders all participants momentarily speechless. I’ll be having what I think is an in-depth discussion with my kids about, say, Earth Day, passionately expressing the idea that as stewards of this planet, it is critical that we care for our Earth and its inhabitants, from trees to rivers to people to animals, all the while feeling a rising sense of satisfaction inspired by their nodding heads and smiles of what I interpret as wholehearted agreement, when suddenly my youngest son, Max, happily pipes up with, “I used to be a zebra!” There is no retrieving a conversation after this. No one remembers the wisdom you believed you were sagely bestowing, or muses about how they might plant a tree or a garden. No, the discussion is over, leaving me to stare wordlessly at the cheerful child who has gone back to eating breakfast and smiling to himself, presumably at the joyful and yet inexplicable memory of being a zebra.

One afternoon when my parents were visiting, my dad showed everyone how to detect their dominant eye: simply hold up your thumb at arm’s length, align it with something in the distance, then alternate closing your eyes. The eye which correctly lines up your thumb with the chosen distant object is your dominant eye, while the less-dominant eye places your thumb way off to the side. We all stood around in the backyard with thumbs up, squinting, no doubt looking ridiculous, and started exclaiming things like, “My right eye is dominant! Is yours? This is so cool!” As the conversation made the interesting segway into to what it might mean to be right-handed and left-eyed or vice versa, Max was uncharacteristically quiet, continuing to hold his arm out stick straight and squinting until excitedly interjecting, “I discovered something! When I close my left eye everything is colorful, and when I close my right eye everything is gray!” »

What?! This is my typical response to a conversation ender. What?!

The potential fallout of conversation enders is that a stunned reaction can make a child feel bad or self-conscious. I try to censor myself, biting back my “what?!” reflex and instead calmly saying something noncommittal like, “Oh?” but sometimes I’m not fast enough. One afternoon this past summer, the doorbell rang during lunchtime and I left Max at the table as I looked out the window to see the UPS man hauling a box containing the grill we had ordered. “The grill is here!” I announced while stepping outside to sign for it, and then put it away in the garage. When I came back inside, Max was white-faced and motionless at the table, and we had the following exchange:

MAX: (faintly) Where is it?

ME: (airily) Oh, I put it in the garage.

MAX: Is it talking?

ME: Um ... no.

MAX: (small voice) It's a gorilla?

ME: What?!

And then, unfortunately, I laughed, and Max burst into tears. To me, everything about our conversation suddenly seemed funny: the fact Max thought we’d ordered a gorilla, that I had immediately put it away in the garage, and — most strange — that the gorilla might be talking. But to Max, it was confusing and a little bit scary, and to cap it all off I laughed at him. If adults are laughing and kids don’t know why, they assume they’re being mocked. I should have sat down next to him, looked into his eyes, and said in a conversational tone, “No honey, it’s not a gorilla. It’s the new grill we ordered! Soon we can have a cookout in the backyard, won’t that be fun?” And if he’d been older with a sense of humor, I could have added comically, “When you said you wanted a gorilla from the Amazon, I thought you said a grill from Amazon! Ha ha!” Because I’m hilarious like that. (And yes, I know gorillas don’t live in the Amazon rainforest. It’s humor. Work with me).

Responding with kindness is crucial to forming a child (or anyone's) confidence. If I laughed or acted otherwise incredulous every time my kids said something unintentionally absurd, not only would they have zero self-confidence but they certainly would not trust their feelings with me or probably with themselves. Sarcasm is mostly lost on kids. It’s not very nice in general, although anyone who knows me will affirm it’s probably my most oft-used method of humor. My oldest son, Oliver, has mastered the art of sarcasm already and it’s admittedly difficult for me to not laugh when he says something that — well, that I might have said. But for a child who doesn’t understand the nuances of sarcasm, this kind of humor can

be devastating. If it happens too often, he might stop asking questions and begin to believe that everyone thinks he is an idiot. This is obviously the last thing I want my kids to think about themselves, so *I have set an intention to choose the kinder, gentler answers rather than disbelief, sarcasm, or attempted humor.* As a person who tends to value a sense of humor almost as highly as other more worthy (and actual) values like honesty and equality, it’s sometimes hard for me to remember to reject the potentially funny answer in favor of a more neutral but ultimately kinder reply.

I try also to remind Oliver of this, as he is guilty of being not only sarcastic but also literal to a fault. The other night as I was tucking Max into bed, he looked beyond me out the window and rapturously told me, “Oh look, Mommy, the moon is shining!” I smiled down at him, and then from the next room we heard Oliver announce dryly, “It’s reflecting, Max. Not shining.” *I mean seriously. Give the kid a break! Save the science lessons, Einstein.*

Oh, see what I mean?! It’s hard. And if I’m inconsistent, how can I expect a fifth grader to do any better?

The Dalai Lama does not advise us to act like wisecracking know-it-alls. He tells us, “Be kind whenever possible. It is always possible.” I’ve been practicing taking a moment before I reply to any question or conversation ender. This gives me enough time to weigh my reaction and decide if it is harmful or helpful. Will it eventually become second nature to always respond in the best possible supportive and caring manner? I sure doubt it! But to boost my kids’ self-confidence and to strengthen their trust in me, I owe it to them to take that extra moment and make a mindful decision about how I respond.

The good news is, in many ways, kindness is already instinctive. Your arm shooting out across the front right passenger seat when you brake abruptly in the car (even if no one else is in the car), pulling a crying friend into an embrace, a gentle reassuring hand on the back of a child learning to ride a bike. Do you stop to think about what you’re doing in that moment, to choose how to act? Of course not. This behavior is reflexive. Chances are, as a child you saw your parents or other adults do similar acts that have subconsciously or deliberately strengthened this innate tendency within you. We should all make a cognizant intention to nurture this instinctive kindness with an eye toward cultivating a generation we can ultimately name as that which embodies kindness. ***On the heels of Generation X, Y, and iGen, what the world desperately needs right now is Generation Kindness.***

Claire Armstrong writes at home ensconced in her favorite sunlit rocking chair overlooking soaring white pines and a small lake in beautiful southwest Michigan. When not composing piano songs or reading, she can be found outside by the backyard pond, catching frogs and turtles with her two sons.

