

Yes and, And, and Seems: Towards an Effective Communication Curriculum designed Teens

Growing up, we all learned the traditional Three Rs of Reading, 'Riting, and 'Rithmetic. Today, we add Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math curricula. All proper studies for modern students in an increasingly competitive society.

However, a key Fourth R that is routinely overlooked, Relationships and Communication. We, as a society, routinely usher students into the adult world with the ability to read, add, and write while lacking critical communication skills. Teenagers are largely ill-prepared to get along, insufficiently prepared for success in current and future family and work environments.

After years training and coaching the parents of our teenagers, it seems to me that we have an opportunity to reshape their future by providing them with a simple, short term, **Yes and, And, and Seems** communications skills curriculum.

For example, imagine the following scenario in the life of an ordinary thirteen to sixteen-year-old teenager

She or he is deeply in love and engaged in a best-friendship or a romantic crush. Their best-friend or "Love of their Life" suggests an activity that they sense is a bad idea or makes them feel comfortable with. What do they do?

Their dilemma at that moment is this: in that very same moment they want to be in love, be socially accepted, feel that they belong. They desire to be popular, and to make things even more challenging they are propelled by the genetic directives to be or cause pregnancy, to procreate. To add insult to injury they are biologically and intellectually immature teenagers who live in a society that bombards them with gender-based media-reinforced images that influence their normative behavioral choices.

How do we, as parents and educators prepare our teenagers for all too common, real-life situations such as these? We will need to include the Fourth R of Effective Communication and Relationship Skills.

It is not difficult, complicated, nor or expensive. It can be as simple as teaching gateway **Yes and, And, and Seems** communication and relationship skills.

Yes, and – a powerful behavior application, an app designed for speaking with one another that permits us to transition from reacting to responding.

Reacting is by its nature, thought-less. Reacting does not involve consideration, reflection or choice. Reaction, a genetically wired human capacity, is appropriate when operating a vehicle. Perceiving a red light, we react by applying our foot on the brake pedal. In that hazardous moment we neither want nor need to think about it, we instantly react and are safe.

In human relationships and communication, reacting is not appropriate. To safeguard our connections and communication we need a moment to pause, to reflect, and consider potential choices. Where want to go? Where we want to wind up?

The two words, "**Yes, and**" permit that critical pause and generate a moment to reflect. Imagine two teenagers, one male, and one female, faced with the dilemma described above. Both of them, having learned "**Yes, and**" together in schools can now transition from reacting to responding with:

- *Yes, and* I am not sure that's a good idea.
- *Yes, and* let's take a moment to see if that's a good idea.
- *Yes, and* I am not comfortable with that.

Disconnected from the moment of reaction, with a simple **"Yes, and..."** responding becomes possible.

As part of the **"Yes, and"** unit we will include the insight that conversations that begin with **"Yes, and"** keep one another listening for the content of the communication, where **"No" and "But"** disrupts the narrative and connection causing listeners to go from *Listening for what we have to say* to *Listen to reply to what we have expressed*. When *Listening to Reply*, we are no longer *listening to what is being communicated*. Teenagers learn that speaking a **"No" or a "But"** disconnects their communication and interrupts narrative. A welcoming **"Yes, and"** maintains their connection and communication.

And? is an effective response when we hear **"No."**

No one likes to hear a **"No"** or other negative response. A **"No"** in our communication tends to lead us into an argument, disconnection from one another, resignation, and silence.

Using and **"And?"** in the proper place preserves the narrative and the relationship.

- *"How about we go out for Chinese food? No."* To which our teenagers can now respond with **"And?"** Their relationship and communication continue with **"And?"**
- *"How about we do something we've never done before? No."* To which our teenagers are now empowered to respond with, **"And?"** Their relationship and communication continue with an **"And?"**

It seems to me that we – avoiding the word **"You"** when we want to communicate with each other.

Two problems arise when we say something like, *"You always. You never..."*

1. **"You always. You never..."** recalls our childhood. As children we became sensitized to **"You."** We heard, *"You come here. You finish your dinner. You do your homework. You apologize"* and so forth. Intellectually and cognitively immature, we learned to **"duck and cover."** We stopped listening and developed a tendency to protect ourselves as best we know-how.
2. **"You always. You never..."** registers in our hearing as **"The Truth,"** even when what we have said is an interpretation and interpretation that is often garbled with emotions. We have what I have labeled a **"Truth app"** running all the time. The Truth app goes into reaction assessing *"Good-Bad, Right-Wrong, and Agree-Disagree?"* If what we've just heard fails our app's **"Truth Test"** we default to another reaction, *"That's not the way it is. I never said that. That's BS."* Then we wind up arguing who's right, who's wrong. But there isn't communication, just confrontation, and discord.

We, as educators install and new behavioral app, **"It seems to me that we..."** that replaces the common **"You."** We teach teenagers to go from **You-ing** to **Seeming**. When teenagers use **Seeming language**, we bypass The Truth app. **"It seems to me that we..."** is not asserting a Truth. It's clearly an interpretation. We can talk about an interpretation in a manner that is far more difficult to talk about when it's a Truth. In addition, there is less emotional investment in a **Seems** statement. In a **Seeming** statement it is also clear that what I am saying is about **Us**, not **You**. There are no fingers pointing in any direction. With a

Seems statement the chances rise that our listener replies with “Yes, and let’s talk about that. Yes, and tell me more.”

So, we have come full circle.

With a **Yes and, And, and Seems communication curriculum for teens**, we empower teenagers to take charge of their lives, relationships, and communication.

There are more directions we can take once this foundation for successful communication. This curriculum, as stated here can be delivered in as little as one class period, one school assembly. Of course more is better.

Possible next directions:

1. Train administration, teachers, and staff in the distinctions of the **Yes and, And, and Seems communication curriculum**. They experience and install these effective communication practices in their everyday lives.
2. Expand and structure the Communication curriculum in concert with educational professionals towards bringing age-appropriate communication skills throughout the TUSD.
3. Convey the curriculum to parents at PTA meetings.
4. Teach curriculum gradually in school-related publications, communications and social media (*a Communications skills column?*)
5. Establish a **Pre-test, Post-test style measure of satisfaction**. How many poor interpersonal incidents before - how many after a selected period of time?

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Paul Zohav has a BA in Sociology from Binghamton University as well as an M.Ed. in Counseling Education from the Univ. of Virginia, Ruffner School of Education.

Paul has been a Domestic Violence Counselor in Virginia and Washington State. He is also a Professional Community, Hospital, and Hospice Chaplain.

Over the past ten years, Paul developed and designed a successful communication curriculum for nearly and newlywed couples, veteran couples, and families. He coaches some 15-20 couples each week at Marriage and Communication Coaching at a central Tucson office.

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He has a fingerprint card.