



# Verbal remedies

In the age of texts and emails, a new game aims to restore the lost art of conversation, **Diana Dekker** writes.

**T**HERE is a concern, scientifically speaking, that the art of conversation is threatened by technology. One day we will have texted and emailed so often and been glued wordlessly to a computer screen for so long that we will open our mouths to speak and conversation won't form properly. We will have been rendered inarticulate, mere tappers of keys.

That is the scenario suggested by British Professor Susan Greenfield, a neuroscientist and author of *ID: the Quest for Identity in the 21st century*, who recently told the British House of Lords that social networking through the internet might eventually impede the ability of younger generations to talk to each other in person.

It's a bad scene, she believes, a crisis which could, she told a British newspaper, reshape how we interact with each other, alter what makes us happy, and modify our capacity for reaching our full potential as individuals.

We could be sleepwalking towards a future in which neurochip technology blurs the line between living and non-living machines – all more a nightmare scenario, than tranquil sleepwalking.

Professor Greenfield's belief

that conversation and human interaction are being threatened by technology is not born out at the coal-face of human relationships, as far as Cary Hayward is concerned. Hayward is national practice manager for Relationship Services in New Zealand and sees first hand whether or not people are still conversing.

"Texting and email have enhanced communication," he says. "They haven't made people less verbal, although they might not have done much for spelling skills. Overall, technology has provided people with a more sophisticated idea of relating than an older generation had.

"My experience of my own teenage children is not at all that talking is reduced, but that they have added to it with more points of contact.

"They're more networked. They share more with their friends and they are less isolated than my peers."

At home, however, relating via mediums such as Bebo, Facebook and YouTube, might mean a son or daughter is less available for intra-family communication. For many families, he says, the impact on family conversation came decades ago with television.

"People would come in and watch television and not

communicate. Maybe people have passed their engagement on from television to computers."

**A**N AUSTRALIAN couple have made a game of the whole idea of the threat to conversation.

Louise Howland and Keith Lamb have devised The Art of Conversation, or TAOC, which Howland says has already sold about 40,000 copies. It is to be released in New Zealand this month, and comprises a series of conversation-starting cards posing questions such as, "What would you do if you were sure to get away with it?", "How do you like someone to express his or her love for you?" and "What do you wonder about most?"

Howland, a former psychiatric nurse, says the game "can give you a dinner party with a difference or a barbecue with more fun".

As well, she says, it is being used by family therapists and marriage guidance counsellors, drug and alcohol counsellors and in schools and hospitals. More than one-third of the games have been sold in this area, where it is used to help promote self-esteem, improve communication and "as a way to get people talking again".

The game was conceived after



Lamb, frontman of once well-known band Hush, was admitted to the Melbourne hospital where Howland was working. The band had broken up and the media had lost interest "and he was having trouble adjusting to normal life".

He found it hard to hold a conversation after life in a rock'n'roll band.

"He came into hospital broken-hearted," says Howland. "He did a lot of things after the band broke up, but he was lost out of the musical lifestyle and couldn't relate."

From the experience, the two, who became good friends and business partners, decided to write an interactive book, with cards holding questions to prompt conversation. Years later the book turned in to a game, even more appropriate in an age when technology was being blamed for threatening conversation.

Howland, who is researching the art of conversation for a master's degree, knows families

who think sitting around having a conversation is a waste of time.

Her research includes looking at how long families spend talking to children without a television or computer on. In her family on week-day evenings there is a no-screen policy.

"We have conversations on those nights. On Saturday nights, we watch a movie. There has to be some balance. Television is great and texting is useful, but every so often you need to turn off screens and gadgets."

Cary Hayward says using a game to start a conversation harks back in spirit to normal family interaction before the advent of television: "When I think of my grandparents, I think of them getting together with other family members playing cards and talking all evening. That was lost with my generation 20 or 30 years ago. The impact of television changed that. My parents would sit and watch television. So to some degree that

happened before computers came in."

The influence of technology on conversation and communication is complex, he believes. It provides a "resource" for relationships, but technology also flourishes in a culture which has become "more informal and individualistic and more consumer-oriented and each of these have impacted on the art of eloquent conversation".

Also, there has always been a generalised gender issue about communication in couples. Studies show women tend to be more articulate and use more words than men. "It's interesting to consider that in connection with technology. Men are higher technology users. They may be transferring the garage or shed to the computer room."

If this is so, he reasons, the impact may be more, rather than less, "relational" than tinkering in the back shed.

