

*Everything teachers say—questions, comments, guidance—can influence what children learn. Intentional, purposeful conversations support children’s cognitive, language, social, and emotional development.*

# Talking With Young Children: How Teachers Encourage Learning

Joan E. Test, Denise D. Cunningham, and Amanda C. Lee

Why do teachers talk with children? There are many excellent reasons, such as these:

- Children enjoy social conversations with adults.
- A few enticing words can encourage children to engage in a particular activity or behavior.
- Thought-provoking questions or using new words can extend children’s thinking and curiosity.
- Adults can directly answer children’s questions.

A great deal of research supports the value of talking with young children.

- When adults purposefully talk more with children, children develop larger vocabularies (Hart & Risley, 1999; Hoff & Naigles, 2002).
- When children have larger vocabularies, they become better readers in middle childhood (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).
- When adults talk to children with longer, more complex words and sentences, children have higher IQ scores (Hart & Risley, 1999).
- When adults talk with children in a responsive and sensitive way, they encourage children’s social and emotional development (Ensor & Hughes, 2008; Harris, 2005).

In general, talking with young children encourages development in many areas: spoken language, early literacy, cognitive development, social skills, and emotional maturity. Speaking with children in increasingly complex and responsive ways does this even better.

This article explores research findings about the effects of adult’s language and conversations on children’s development. It also discusses ways that teachers can include more intentional talk in their daily routines and classroom activities to support children’s learning.

## How Adult Talk Supports Children’s Development Children’s Vocabularies Grow

When two researchers looked at families with young children who were learning to talk, they found that no matter what a family’s economic or social situation, the

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**Joan E. Test, Ed.D.**, is Assistant Professor, Childhood Education and Family Studies, Missouri State University, Springfield. She is the faculty liaison to the Child Development Center at Missouri State and teaches courses in child and human development. Her research focuses on the influence of social interactions on children’s development in families and early childhood settings.

**Denise D. Cunningham, Ph.D.**, is Assistant Professor, Childhood Education and Family Studies, Missouri State University, Springfield. She has many years of experience as the director of an early childhood center and as a teacher and literacy coach in the St. Louis Public Schools. Her research interests include creating high-quality environments to promote children’s language and literacy development.

**Amanda C. Lee, B.S.**, is a Lead Teacher in the Child Development Center, Missouri State University, Springfield. Lee is pursuing her Master’s degree in Early Childhood Education at Missouri State. She has had the opportunity to “put theory into practice” and use rich, meaningful language every day with the children in her classroom!

### Why Talk WITH Young Children?

Talking with young children encourages development in

- spoken language
- early literacy
- cognitive development
- social skills
- emotional maturity

Speak with children in increasingly complex and responsive ways.

more that parents engaged in daily conversations with their children, the more rapidly the children's vocabularies grew (Hart & Risley, 1999).

Nearly all families talk with their children to get things accomplished, such as eating, getting dressed, and keeping children safe and occupied. The extra conversation, however, done just for the pleasure of a social exchange, makes a real difference. The amount of this extra conversation is highly related to children's vocabulary growth.

- The more language that 2-year-olds hear, the more rapidly they add words to their vocabulary (Hoff & Naigles, 2002).
- The richer the vocabulary and the more complex the sentences that children hear, the more quickly their language develops beginning at age 2 (Hoff & Naigles, 2002; Weizman & Snow, 2001).
- The helpfulness of speech for explaining a word's meaning really makes a difference in children's language development (Weizman & Snow, 2001).
- The more different types of words that adults use with young children, the larger vocabularies preschoolers develop (Pan, Rowe, Singer, & Snow, 2005).

In summary, talking more, helping children understand the meanings of words, and speaking in richer, more complex ways leads to more rapid growth in children's language.

## Children's Literacy Blossoms

Spoken language is the foundation for reading and writing. In the

preschool years, children learn sound patterns, word meanings, and sentence structure, as well as how to participate in conversation. These abilities are critical for future reading and success in school. Children who develop strong spoken language abilities in their early years stride far ahead of their peers when it comes to reading later in childhood. Those who do not have language strengths find it difficult to keep pace with their peers (Snow et al., 1998).

Preschoolers learn about 2,500 new words a year—about 7 new words every day (Wolfe & Nevills, 2004). This store of vocabulary words provides children with information they need to assist in decoding unknown words and comprehending what they read (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

Preschool children play with the sounds and rhythms of language every time they recite nursery rhymes and poetry, sing songs or do fingerplays, and listen to stories. This awareness of the sounds of language (phonological awareness) helps children match letters to sounds as they learn to read and write (Adams, 1990). Language comprehension, which young children gain through conversations with families and teachers, contributes to children's reading success (Scarborough, 2002; Snow, Griffin, & Burns, 2005).

**Spoken language provides brains with building blocks for literacy.**

Preschoolers' experiences and their related conversations help build children's brains for reading. For example, children who live on a farm or in a rural area will hear and participate in conversations about rural

life. Talk about farmers, barns, cows, chickens, and ducks provides children with the necessary words and understanding to comprehend and eventually read, delightful books such as *Click, Clack, Moo: Cows That Type* (Cronin, 2005).

Conversations with young children that include *decontextualized* language—language that moves beyond the immediate and literal to express past and future events, ideas, images, and explanations—also promote children's ability to write stories and essays when they are older (Dickinson, 2001). For young children, this kind of talk may include narration about what went on at school, fantasy and pretend play, explanations about books or pictures, and other topics of interest.

### What is *decontextualized* language?

Words that are *decontextualized* go beyond the immediate and literal to express past and future events, ideas, images, and explanations. For example, reviewing the day's activities, reading fairy tales, and making plans to plant vegetable seeds with children's families all use *decontextualized* language

When adults and children engage in conversation, they are creating a situation in which children can be exposed to new or *rare* words (Tabors, Beals, & Weizman, 2001). These rare words are already in the adult's vocabulary. However, when these words are used during conversations, children begin to understand each word's meaning. Connecting new, more difficult words to a child's experience provides contextual support for construction of meaning.

Spoken language provides children's brains with the building blocks

for literacy. Children who acquire speech quickly and easily are becoming more ready to learn to read. Children who hear complex and varied conversations that involve familiar topics, and who have meaningful opportunities to use and experiment with words and conversations, will enter school with the best preparation to proceed through the later stages of literacy development.

In addition to supporting language and literacy growth, talking with children can positively influence other areas of children's development, such as social relationships, social understanding, knowledge of emotions, emotional well-being, and cognition.

## Children Learn Social and Emotional Skills

Conversations among adults and children provide a rich context for early social and emotional development. Conversations are the means through which children see that other people may have a different perspective than their own (Harris, 2005). As adults talk with them, children learn about other people's ideas and experiences and compare these to their lives. Through this process children realize that people see and experience things differently. These experiences foster empathy.

When adults talk with children about emotions, it helps children understand their own and others' emotions. This understanding then

helps children have more positive relationships with their peers (Hughes & Leekam, 2004). It also leads to a greater ability to regulate emotions and behavior (Epstein, 2009).

In addition to learning from *what* adults say in conversation, children also learn from *how* adults respond to them. If parents and teachers respond sensitively to what children express, rather than ignoring them, being intrusive, or not understanding, they build a bond of trust. These kinds of responsive conversations lead to the development of secure attachments, which help children feel more competent and self-confident (Goldberg, 2000). Such feelings lead to more positive peer relationships throughout



Subjects & Predicates

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children's lives (Bee & Boyd, 2010; Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005).

Adult responsiveness to children's interests and concerns in conversations, and the degree to which what adults say connects to what children have just said to them, contribute greatly to children's social understanding (Ensor & Hughes, 2008). Conversations with children are also a fertile ground for helping children learn to solve social problems. Through sensitive questions and comments, adults can

- coach children to see how their behavior affects others,
- help children identify how others feel,
- encourage children's empathy, and
- demonstrate how to relate positively with others (Epstein, 2009).

Responsive and sensitive conversations support children's thinking about emotions and the social world. Talking with children also encourages thinking, or cognitive development, in a much broader sense.

## Children's Cognitive Development Is Supported

Researchers have found a variety of effects of intentional talk on children's intelligence.

- The more that families talked with children every day, the higher were pre-schoolers' IQs, particularly when parents used rich and complex language (Hart & Risley, 1999).
- Families who asked many questions, rather than giving commands, had preschoolers with higher IQ scores (Hart & Risley, 1999).

- When adults asked thought-provoking questions, children were encouraged to use higher-level thinking skills such as inference, prediction, and interpretation (Weitzman & Greenberg, 2002).
- When adults ask questions and talk with children as they play together, adults are scaffolding children's learning through what they say to children, thus fostering cognitive development (Berk & Winsler, 1995; Vygotsky, 1962).

Vygotsky's work also suggests that children learn ways of thinking through hearing adults' talk. For example, as adults tell children about how to do things, children hear what adults say. As children then do the action, they repeat adults' words, out loud at first and later to themselves silently, talking themselves through the action.

**Purposefully engage in high-quality, pleasurable conversations.**

Children internalize adults' words, and these words (that express adults' thoughts) become part of how children think. When teachers' and parents' words express curiosity and in-depth thinking, such as when they ask open-ended questions, children begin to think in this way as well.

In summary, filling speech to children with thought-provoking questions and curiosity—rather than commands—advances children's thinking. Talking more with children in a way that is pleasurable, responsive, and encourages curiosity does a world of good for children's thinking, emotions, social development, language, and literacy development.

## High-Quality Talk in Early Childhood Classrooms

Preschool teachers talk with children about 60% to 80% of the time that they interact (Test, 1988). In this study, Test found that child care teachers talk to young children as much as parents talk to their children at home.

Nevertheless, classroom relationships are different than those at home. When teachers interact with groups of children, rather than with a single child, they change how they talk with children (Schaffer & Liddell, 1984). What are some of the differences?

- While teachers talk as much as parents, teachers direct less language specifically to individual children.
- Speech is likely to be more directive and prohibitive when teachers interact with groups of children. Only about 20% of teachers' talk to children was for something other than being directive or to control children's behavior (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).
- Children's language is less well developed and their vocabulary is smaller when teachers use language that is more controlling (McCartney, 1984).
- When interacting with groups of children, teachers tend to have less of the good-quality, one-to-one, just for the pleasure of it, kind of conversational exchanges that Hart and Risley found make a difference in children's development.



Photo courtesy of the authors

*In conversations with adults, children learn about other people's ideas and experiences and compare these to their own. Through this process children realize that people see and experience things differently. These experiences foster empathy.*

Teachers can change this by purposefully engaging in high-quality, pleasurable exchanges with children. Children's language development can make substantive progress when teachers adapt their speech to children, as documented by a number of important studies such as those cited here.

### **Characteristics of High-Quality Talk**

The types of verbal interactions that teachers have with children make a difference in their development. These are some of the most critical research findings to document the value of high-quality verbal communication with young children.

- Children's language was more advanced depending on the quantity and quality of the teacher talk they heard (Belsky, et al., 2007; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network [ECCRN], 2000). These increases were maintained through pre-school and later in school.
- Children's cognitive and social development were more advanced when teachers increased the amount of high-quality language (NICHD ECCRN, 2000, 2006). High-quality language means that teachers ask many thought-provoking questions, respond to children's vocalizations and words, and talk frequently to children using a positive tone of voice.
- Children's language development is more advanced the more teachers talk using less controlling language (McCartney, 1984).
- Children in preschool classrooms had better academic, language, and social skills when teachers engaged in higher-quality interactions with children, as assessed with the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (Mashburn, et al., 2008). The developers of the CLASS

maintain that it is the quality and nature of interactions between teachers and children that are most critical for preschoolers' development and learning (Pianta, La Paro, & Hamre, 2008).

- The more that teachers converse with children in their care, the more considerate and sociable those children are (Phillips, McCartney, & Scarr, 1987).
- If teachers are more responsive when they engage with children, children are more cooperative (Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, Burchinal, O'Brien, & McCartney, 2002).
- When teachers respond to children using positive language, this has a beneficial effect on children's social and emotional development (NICHD ECCRN, 2006).

**High-quality language** means that teachers ask many thought-provoking questions, respond to children's vocalizations and words, and talk frequently to children using a positive tone of voice.

How can early childhood teachers use richer, more complex, and personally responsive language? How can teachers engage in responsive and sensitive conversations? How can they use questions, rhymes, and language beyond the immediate here and now with young children? Conversations, questions, and dialogue to benefit children's development can be infused into many areas, activities, and routines. Here are some possibilities.

## Talk During Children's Explorations

**Centers.** Teachers support language development in centers by planning for sufficient time, space, and challenging materials. The areas should be well defined and amply stocked. Smaller, cozier areas for learning centers provide opportunities for intimate conversations. Children working closely together in a center are more likely to experiment with language—both in structure and new vocabulary. Critically evaluate the classroom and find ways to create conversation areas.

**Blocks and Manipulatives.** In this area, children are usually eager to share the pleasure of what they are creating. They use language to solve problems, both with the process of construction and when negotiating social relationships. Teachers encourage children to talk about their play by making comments that invite responses. "Tell me how you made this structure." Children enthusiastically describe and label what they built and how they built it.

Wise teachers will validate what children say and expand on it. When a child says, "Look at my big tower!" a teacher might respond, "Your tower is SO tall! In fact, I see that you used a stool to reach the top. Your building is *enormous!*" Use of rich vocabulary and complex sentences encourages children's language development.

Teachers can scaffold children's conversations and ask thought-provoking questions that encourage children to predict or think of other solutions, such as when they assemble puzzles or manipulatives. "What do you think will happen if you add that section?" "How did you figure out

which puzzle piece fit there?"

Teachers model how to have a conversation by

- being responsive to children's actions and words,
- giving children time to respond to questions,
- listening closely to their responses, and
- responding to children's thoughts and work.

When children leave their structures up for an extended time, conversation is extended even more. Children may ponder what more they can add to the structure, including vehicles or animals. They may ask an adult to write labels such as "bridge over the river" or "Anna's farm."

### Scaffold children's conversations.

Taking and displaying photographs of children with their structures or manipulative constructions can invite further conversation. Children may discuss the engineering of how they built the structure or come up with even more elaborate ideas for assembling their next castle.

In addition to accessories such as small vehicles, animals, and people, teachers might include unstructured materials such as fabric, clothespins, shells, and feathers in the block area. These items promote richer discussions that might include talking about textures of wood versus shells or feathers. A teacher might ask, "How could you use this cloth in your building?" to get children started.

**Dramatic Play.** Teachers readily support children's social and emotional development through their conversations as children explore roles

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and ideas, both real and make-believe. In dramatic play, much of children's expression and meaning is implied through their movements and gestures. Teachers who listen and watch carefully can be responsive to children's implied meanings. They can describe children's actions to make children's intentions more explicit for their peers.

Young children typically find it easy to come up with roles in dramatic play, but they may have a hard time coordinating them with others' roles. For example, as children work out their roles in the housekeeping area, one child may want to be the mommy and have the other child be the daddy. However, the other child may want to be something else, such as the family cat.

A teacher seeing this exchange could say, "What's going on? It looks like you are frustrated." The teacher could then help children devise solutions by saying, "What could you do?" and then, "What do you think about that? Is that something you want to do?"

If a child insists and says, "But he has to be the daddy," a teacher could say, "How else could you have a daddy?" or "Do you have ideas on how you could find another person to be the daddy?" Skilled teachers give this kind of support without being

intrusive or taking over the play. Instead, they are sensitive to children's feelings and ideas.

Through conversations such as these, teachers can scaffold children's abilities to coordinate with others in dramatic play. Children learn valuable social and emotional skills through these interactions and discussions. They learn to negotiate, interact, and verbalize their feelings.

Joining ongoing dramatic play can be difficult for the entering child as well as for those who are already involved in play, because adding another person changes the scenario. Teachers can guide and scaffold children as they re-construct the scene and roles. Ask questions that support children's expression of ideas and feelings as well as facilitate their negotiations with each other.

As children enact scenes from their own social world, such as mommy, daddy, baby, sister, or brother, they often act out and discuss events from their lives. This talk about things that have happened at home is a wonderful example of children's use of *decontextualized* language.

Teachers support this kind of language, which contributes to early literacy development, by making sure children have a chance to express their ideas during play. Teachers follow along as children create the scenario. Occasionally, adults will make comments and ask questions, but let children direct their own play. When children talk about their own experiences, they are laying the foundation for later storytelling and narrative development, which are important early literacy skills.

**Science Explorations.** To encourage science learnings, teachers might display an intriguing object to

encourage children to muse about what it is or how it works. Ask children questions using words that help to explain their meaning. By doing this, teachers encourage both language and thinking.

A teacher might put out an unusual rock and ask, "What do you think this is? Why do you think that? How would you describe its texture? What colors do you see? How do you think rocks are made?"

### Ask thought-provoking questions.

After children have shared their ideas, the teacher might say, "The sand and leaves pack down in layers to make the rock. The sediment forms layers." Read books about rocks and examine a variety of different types such as rocks with sparkles (mica), arrowheads, and fossils. Children's questions stimulate each other's curiosity and scientific thinking, while the rich vocabulary encourages language development.

**Outdoor Play.** The outdoors is another area that can greatly support children's development through talk. When children play outdoors, they communicate with each other and their teachers.

They develop concepts about nature, for example, as they describe their direct experiences with rain, snow, and wind. Experiences with natural materials such as trees are great vocabulary builders. Teachers can weave so many words into conversations to describe sand, for example, and what children can do with it:

- size (tiny, huge, small)
- shape (round, pointed, flat)

- texture (grainy, smooth, bumpy)
- temperature (hot, warm, cool)
- quantity (half full, overflowing, empty)
- dump (piles, mountains)
- pack (wet, dry, cracks)
- pound (pat, press)
- form (dry mounds, wet molds)

Outdoors is also a great place to support children’s social development through conversation. As children play outdoors, they have more freedom and room to explore in a large area, yet sometimes it seems that everyone wants the same shovel or riding vehicle. Talk with children in these situations, help them label their feelings, and guide them to come up with their own solutions for sharing equipment.

**Let children direct their own play.**

Sometimes children want to have a bit of time and space away from a large group. They might sit with a teacher or friend in a shady spot. This is an ideal time to engage in one-on-one conversation just for the pleasure of it. Such exchanges, when responsive and sensitive to children’s feelings and interests, contribute so much to children’s language, cognitive, and social development.

## Conversations During Everyday Routines

**Arrival.** When children engage in routine greetings (“How are you this morning, Gabriel?” “I am fine, thank you.”), they are learning appropriate sentence structure and common uses of friendly language in social settings, as

well as how to take turns in conversation.

After a greeting, most teachers make sure they engage in a short conversation with each child. The topic will depend on the child. “I see you have new sneakers.” Children often happily tell about their shoes. Teachers can also ask questions to prompt children. “Where did you get your shoes? Who went shopping with you? What else did you do together?” After each question, wait about 3 seconds (longer for children for whom English is a second language), giving children a chance to think and respond. This models good conversation skills for children, too.

Teachers can also make inquiries about the child’s activities since the previous school day. “I’m wondering if you played outside when you got home yesterday.” “Tell me about your family picnic on the weekend. You were so excited about it on Friday.” In addition to being pleasurable, conversations like this can also be decontextualized talk about the past (last night, the weekend). This kind of talk encourages children to make smooth transitions between home and school.

After greetings, teachers lead children into classroom experiences.

### Model Good Conversation Skills

- Choose a topic that is important to the child.
- Ask a thought-provoking question or make an open-ended comment to prompt the child’s response.
- Wait at least 3 seconds (longer for children for whom English is a second language), to give the child a chance to think and respond.
- Listen to the child and respond with more conversation.

“Today, we have something new in the science area. Can you figure out what it is?” Or, “We will eat breakfast soon. What do you smell? What do you think we will eat today?”

**Snacks and Meals.** Family-style dining promotes enriching talk. Teachers and children informally discuss events, in the classroom and beyond, using new vocabulary. When children are eating apple slices, a teacher might remind children of a book they read about picking apples, or the graph they made about their favorite apples. Respond to children’s interests about the parts of an apple (peel, stem, seeds) or its shape, color, and taste. Children also enjoy comparing the food at school to what they eat at home. “How is this taco like what you have at home? How is it different?”

**Nap.** Children often are soothed by a few soft words as they are tucked in for a nap. When they awaken, some like to snuggle and chat for a few minutes. Teachers can have conversations with children about their dreams or discuss what children plan for later activities.

Other children don’t want to talk as they wake up, but would rather just snuggle with a teacher. Being quiet at times like these and just cuddling is a good way to be responsive and sensitive, too. Then, when children are more awake and ready to talk, teachers can follow up on children’s interests.

**Departure.** As children leave the classroom at the end of the day, teachers can encourage children to talk with their families about their day. “What will you tell Aunt Jessica that we did today?” “What do you remember most about our adventures?” As children leave, be sure

to say, “Good bye. See you tomorrow!” This shows children that they are cared for and can look forward to the next day.

## Interactions During Teacher-Guided Learning

**Books and Stories.** Interactive reading aloud is a rich source of language, literacy, social, emotional, and cognitive support. By preparing the children to listen, and talking with children about the story as it is being

read to them, teachers help children build important literacy skills such as prediction and comprehension. Teachers can

- give children something specific to look or listen for,
- ask recall questions about story details,
- have children describe the art or photographs,
- relate the story to personal experiences,
- ask children to predict what might take place next, and

- imagine what might happen beyond the story.

For example, as a teacher reads the story of the three little pigs, one might ask, “Who has heard the wind blow outside your house? What happened then?”

Use the rich vocabulary introduced in children’s literature to introduce difficult or rare words to young children. Teachers can talk about what these new words mean as they read the book. For example, with the story of *The Pout-Pout Fish* (Diesen, 2008),



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*Teachers who talk with children during dramatic play can scaffold their ability to coordinate with others. Children learn to negotiate, interact, and verbalize their feelings during these discussions.*

introduce *pout*, *scowl*, and *mope* as words to describe a child's behavior when sad, upset, or angry. Scaffold children's construction of meaning through conversation about the story.

Teachers can encourage decontextualized language, language beyond the here and now, by making up stories with children and asking them, "Tell me what you see. What is the picture in your mind when you hear (or tell) the story?" This encourages children to develop images in their mind's eyes.

Reading books with repeating rhythms or rhymes, such as Dr. Seuss stories, are fun ways to increase children's awareness and pleasure in talk that supports verbal fluency, patterning, and phonemic awareness. Choose a variety of books to build early literacy skills.

**Poetry, Fingerplays, and Songs.** Another way to further children's language development is to informally incorporate poetry and songs into small or whole group activities. Sharing nursery rhymes, rhyming stories, fingerplays, and songs enhances children's awareness of words that have sound similarities and rhyming patterns. Rhythm, melody, and actions support children's verbal fluency and comprehension. Fingerplays, such as "Itsy, Bitsy Spider" or "Bee Hive," and songs with actions (for example, "The Wheels on the Bus") can easily be incorporated into daily routines and group times.

## Talking to Resolve Conflicts

Conflicts among children are inevitable. Disputes often arise as children try to express and deal with emotions connected to classroom

events or experiences. Teachers can use words to help children express their emotions and figure out how to solve their conflicts verbally.

In disagreements over toys, for example, skilled teachers help children verbalize their intents and wishes and lead them to a compromise. When a teacher sees two children pulling on the same toy and screaming, approach calmly and ask, "What is happening here?" Teachers may need to verbalize children's feelings for them, which will give children the words to use in the future. "Arianna, you look like you are upset that Betsy wants to play with the doll too."

Listen to all confirmations or corrections that the children make. Children's abilities to verify or clarify the accuracy of an adult's empathic statements will grow over time, signaling both more self-awareness and further language development.

After children express or clarify the problem, teachers at first are likely to need to help them think of alternatives. "What could you do to solve this problem?" Eventually, children will be able to use talk to resolve their own conflicts without adult intervention. Scaffolding children's discussion and problem solving with each other, by helping them verbalize their feelings and ideas, supports both social and emotional development.

As children play, teachers can also talk about more subtle emotions that arise in children's activities. A teacher might say, "I see that you are frowning. Tell me what's going on." Or, "You have a puzzled look on your face. What are you feeling?" If the child has difficulty responding after a few seconds, teachers can make an empathic response, such as "Are you

sad?" or "Are you wondering...?"

When teachers narrate their own feelings about classroom events, this can also increase children's understanding of others' perceptions. "I am feeling anxious because it's so loud in here." Or, "Evan, I am so pleased that you hung up your jacket all by yourself."

The best times to solve conflicts are not necessarily when children are in the thick of a dispute. In addition, lead conversations about classroom problems at other opportunities, such as mealtimes. "I noticed that many of you had a hard time sharing the sand toys outside today. What do you think we could do about that?" Very often children are more able to talk with others about conflicts or problems and make good suggestions when they are not personally involved with the issue at that moment.

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Throughout the day, wise teachers respond to children's talk and ideas. Have conversations for the sheer pleasure of it. Use positive, rich, and empathic language (rather than commands or negative statements). Be curious and ask thought-provoking questions. Give children time to respond, listen to what they say, and then respond to their ideas.

While these suggestions may seem like normal routines for early childhood classrooms, teachers are encouraged to plan to improve their frequency of intentional conversations. Purposeful interactions and talk by responsive and sensitive teachers can truly make a difference in promoting children's development.

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**From SACUS to SECA:  
A History of the Southern Early  
Childhood Association from  
1990-2010**

It is always important to chronicle the history of an Association and SECA has a very rich history, full of humorous, poignant and significant events and stories. Dr. Milly Cowles generously agreed to assist the SECA office staff in pulling together the history of the last 20 years and we've produced a document that provides insights into the functioning of the Association and its impact on the development of early childhood professionals in the South.

The history document is posted (along with the first SACUS history, *The First Forty Years*) at [http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/leadership\\_pdf.php#histories](http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/leadership_pdf.php#histories)

We hope you'll take a moment to go through the history and enjoy the evolution that SACUS/SECA has experienced. We're sure you'll find something that you didn't know about SECA!

**Thanks to  
Dr. Milly Cowles  
of Alabama**



# Put These Ideas Into Practice!

## Talking With Young Children: How Teachers Encourage Learning

Joan E. Test, Denise D. Cunningham, and Amanda C. Lee

### Talking with children supports **ALL** areas of development!

#### Talk to enrich language and literacy

- Choose richer *vocabulary*. "I'm wondering how we could make a mural about ocean creatures."
- Talk with children just for the *fun* of it.
- Use *pleasurable* language, not just words to accomplish a task. "I see you are experimenting at the water table!"
- Use more *complex, descriptive* sentences.
- Give *hints* about what words mean. "That block tower is gigantic! You can't even see over the top!"
- Offer *props* to extend play.
- Make read-alouds *interactive*. Ask thought-provoking questions. Encourage predictions.
- Talk *beyond* the here and now. "Remember when we walked around the neighborhood looking for signs of spring?"
- Add rhythms and sound patterns. Sing with actions, use fingerplays, and act out nursery rhymes.

#### Talk to enhance cognitive development

- Describe what is *happening*.
- Ask *thought-provoking* questions. "Who remembers... What else... When might... Where could... Why do you think...?"
- *Validate* what children say, and expand on it.
- Encourage children to think of *multiple solutions*. "How else could we...?"
- Make *predictions*. "What do you think will happen if...?"

**High-quality language** means that teachers ask many thought-provoking questions, respond to children's vocalizations and words, and talk frequently to children using a positive tone of voice.

#### Talk to nurture social and emotional development

- Use *friendly and positive* language. "We walk quietly in the hall so the babies can sleep."
- *Respond* to children's interests and concerns.
- Be *sensitive*. Listen to what children say. Tune in to their feelings.
- Have *conversations*. Connect with what children talk about.
- *Verbalize feelings*. Describe how children might be feeling. Ask them to confirm or find better words.
- Gently guide children to resolve their own disagreements. Coach children in conflict resolution.

#### Model how to have a conversation by

- being responsive to children's actions and words,
- giving children time to respond to questions,
- listening closely to their responses, and
- responding to children's thoughts and work.

### Strategies to develop teachers' classroom talk skills

Directors can encourage staff to develop their talking skills with techniques such as these.

#### Reflect

- Keep journals about classroom conversations.
- Identify which conversations encouraged children's development.
- Discuss: Why did those conversations have such a positive effect?
- Think about: What would make sense to try next?

#### Observe and discuss

- Two teachers observe each other's conversations with children (or use videos).

- Note how often each teacher talks with children and what was said.
- Discuss and assess the observations.
- Think of ways to add more rich and complex talk with children.

#### Experiment

- Ask each teacher to add one new way of talking with children for a few days. What happened?
- Suggest that teachers add more talk to a center or a daily routine for a week. How did children's behaviors change? Why?

Note: *Dimensions of Early Childhood* readers are encouraged to copy this material for early childhood students as well as teachers of young children as a professional development tool.