ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Let Children Talk: Strategies to Foster Early Language and Vocabulary Development through Conversation

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Introduction

Children need opportunities to talk with and receive feedback from adults to develop their language skills. Conversations can boost this talk throughout early learning settings, especially during interactive book reading and play.

Subject

Young children's early oral language skills lay the foundation for learning to read, and ultimately for success in school.[1] Children primarily learn language by engaging in purposeful, back-and-forth conversations with adults. Yet, observational research has shown that extended conversations with ample child talk are not common in early and elementary classrooms[2]; instead, adult talk, often focused on giving directions, generally predominates.[3] Here we describe adult-child conversations that best equip children with the language skills they need to learn to

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read.

Problems

Although many young children love to share their ideas about the world, eliciting focused and extended child talk and adult-child conversations in classrooms and other settings can be very difficult. One classroom constraint involves the high ratio of children to adults – often in the realm of 20 to 2. A second is that teachers often need individualized, ongoing support, especially personalized coaching, to implement conversations with children.[4]

Research Context

Several bodies of research, including basic science on word learning[5], observational work in homes and classrooms, and intervention studies with both typically developing children[6,7] and those with special needs,[8] elucidate how high-quality conversations build children's early language skills.

Key Research Questions

How can educators and caregivers engage children in effective conversations to increase their language skills, and especially their vocabulary?

Recent Research Results

Extended conversations rest on three pillars: adults' (1) modeling of rich language for children,[2] (2) asking children open-ended prompts,[9] and (3) providing meaningful feedback on what children have said, resulting in multiple conversational turns.[6,10-12] These three components of conversation can be used in a variety of contexts and settings but have often been studied in interactive book reading, where an adult reads a text aloud and poses questions to involve children,[13] and in play, where an adult supports children in acting out a life experience (e.g., pretending to be in a restaurant), building a structure, playing a game,[14] or other activity.

Modeling rich language. Children who hear more words in their environment build larger vocabularies, as early as 3 years.[15,16] Further, when those words include sophisticated and varied vocabulary, as well as complex syntax, children demonstrate stronger language outcomes over time[17]. Children benefit when adults vividly describe the world, narrate their own actions, and detail what children are doing when they work or play. In addition, reading books with children

exposes them to syntactically complex prose[18] and new words and ideas, often with pictures to share their meaning.[19] For example, the classic book *The Name Jar*[20] contains rare words such as groove, wrinkled, and cabbage, all embedded in sophisticated, multi-phrase sentences.

Open-ended prompts. While hearing language is important, children also need to use language for themselves. Adults can ask open-ended prompts, which have more than one correct answer and generally require a multiple-word response.[9] These prompts often begin with question words such as "why" and "how," or statements inviting children to "describe" or "tell me more." Open-ended questions are powerful scaffolds during interactive book reading, as they encourage children's discourse about narrative and informational texts, and during play, when they invite child thought and talk. For example, while children pretend to work in a grocery store like the one in *The Name Jar*, a teacher could ask, "Tell me what kinds of foods you sell here!"

Meaningful feedback. While open-ended prompts serve as the opening volley in a back-and-forth exchange, the adult must provide meaningful feedback to the child to create a full conversation. Ideally, a conversation includes five or more rounds of adult-child exchanges.[6] Feedback can take myriad forms,[21] but two have particularly strong evidence of effectiveness for child language. First, *linguistic expansions* affirm the gist of a child's response while restating the child's response with more sophisticated language structures.[22,23] When reading *The Name Jar*, for example, a teacher might ask about how Unhei, the main character, feels as friends mispronounce her Korean name, to which a child might respond, "Sad." The adult could affirm and extend the child's remark with an extension such as, "That's right; she's feeling very sad as she sits on the bus." Here the adult models a grammatically complete sentence for the young speaker. Second, *conceptual expansions* involve adding a new idea, such as a vocabulary word or fact, to a child's response, helping children connect concepts.[10] For example, the teacher might augment her linguistic expansion by adding, "She's realizing that she's unique or different from her new friends." Here the teacher adds several new ideas, including the vocabulary term *unique* .

Follow-up question. Follow-up questions ask the same child, or another child in the group, to build on a previous response in the conversation. For example, when reading *The Name Jar*, the teacher might ask, "Ahmad just told us about how Unhei fills a whole page with marks from her special name stamp from her grandmother. Why does this name stamp change the way she feels about her name?" Resonant with the second point above, *open-ended* follow-up prompts can be particularly beneficial.

Research Gaps

Although basic research around adult-child linguistic interaction is strong, relatively less work has explored the nuts-and-bolts application issues of how best to bring conversations into classrooms and other group contexts. One research gap concerns the uncertain dosage of high-quality conversations children need to engage in throughout the day. Back-and-forth conversations take a significant amount of teachers' time and generally cannot be accomplished with each child every day. Precision around ideal dosage would greatly help teachers plan. A second research gap involves uncertainty around which types of feedback are best suited for different conversations and learners. For example, determining what type(s) of feedback best support children with limited language skills without overwhelming them would support effective instructional individualization.

Conclusions

Adults can scaffold children's language development through conversations, which include modeling language to build children's knowledge about language, asking open-ended questions to prompt children's talk, and posing follow-up questions to keep children's ideas and words flowing. Book reading is one fruitful context for conversation, because books expose children to complex language and sophisticated vocabulary that they may not encounter in everyday experience. Play is another valuable arena for conversation, because adults can listen to children's talk, understand what most interests them, and support them in talking about their world. Importantly, though, many early learning contexts demonstrate limited adult-child conversation, partly because of the logistical constraints on conversations in large classrooms or groups. Research urgently needs to determine how best to help teachers foster children's conversational engagement, because language represents a powerful lever for academic and social development over time.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

As they prepare for reading instruction, young children need well-developed language skills to understand the words they will soon begin to decode. These opportunities can occur in more structured settings such as book reading and school activities, as well as in more informal settings such as play and transitions from one activity to another. All that is needed is an invested adult willing to support children in expressing their ideas.

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One implication of this work is that both teachers' and families' efforts are needed. Families occupy a unique niche in this work, offering children one-on-one conversational partners with whom to extensively practice language. Second, policymakers can explore how teachers could be better supported in classrooms so that conversations are easier to conduct, including examining class sizes and the availability of support personnel to oversee small groups. Third, given the high stakes of early language and vocabulary, educators need effective and ongoing support around teaching this outcome.

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