



Conversations in Child Care

One of the measures of excellence in child care is the quality of the conversations that occur between providers and children. Conversations are important for the social and emotional development of young children. They also play an important role in promoting the development of oral language, which is essential for literacy. Oral language includes skills like talking and taking part in conversations (expressive language), and listening to others and understanding stories (receptive language). Literacy (reading and writing) is often thought of as a school-aged learning task, but literacy actually starts in infancy and grows out of oral language. In one study, more than a third of children were entering school without the resources they needed to succeed at reading and writing. Child care providers and parents together play a huge role in developing in children the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed for reading and writing, through the conversations that they have with young children.

How to have better conversations with young children:

Look for opportunities to engage children in conversation

Greeting children in the morning when they arrive, changing a diaper, supervising children in outdoor play, helping a child put on a coat are all good times to have conversations with children.

Think about conversations in a bigger way

Too often, parents and child care providers view talking to children as giving information or directions, but it is important to think of conversations as much bigger and more important than that. It is the difference between talking to and talking with a child. Conversations in which caregivers talk with children offer the opportunity for adults to show a child that they care and are interested in what the child thinks about things, and to shape a child's moral development.

Start early

Very young children benefit from having a "conversation" with an adult, even when they can't talk. For instance, a not-yet-verbal toddler falls on the floor in tears when his mother leaves him in the morning and he discovers another child is using his favorite toy. His teacher kneels down, looks him in the eye and puts into words for him how she imagines he feels,

"I'm sorry you are feeling sad. It's hard to say goodbye to your mother; but she will be back after lunch, and I am very glad to see you today. It's hard to share your favorite toy with John, isn't it? But you will have your turn soon! What would you like to do while you wait for John to finish playing with the truck?"

In less than a minute, the teacher

- conveys to the child that she respects and understands what he is feeling,
- reassures him that his mother will return,
- reassures him that she enjoys his company and will keep him safe,
- offers help with how to redirect his attention.

Helping young children to identify and share their (often intense) feelings, and to understand the feelings of others, helps them to learn how to use their words instead of their bodies in situations of conflict with other children. This is an important step in the child's moral development as well as a predictor of later success in school.

Allow young children to initiate conversations

As the child begins to develop her own language, the nature of conversations shifts and the child begins to initiate her own conversations. Children with even very basic language skills or language delays can, and *should*, initiate conversations with caregivers if they are encouraged to do so. Responding to a child's curiosity fuels it and conveys to the child that her ideas are interesting. Remember that much

of what is familiar to us as adults is new for young children and needs explaining! Helping children acquire language that refers to persons, things and events outside of the child's immediate situation, as in stories, is also important for school and literacy readiness.

Use open-ended questions

Using open-ended questions (those that require more than a one or two word answer) is an important strategy for encouraging children's language development. Open-ended questions engage children in more extended conversations and encourage the development of expressive language abilities. Helping children *talk* through problems prepares them for being able to *think* through problems.

Introduce new words

Conversations are also an important way to enlarge a child's vocabulary.

- Children between the ages of 2 and 6 learn an average of 6 to 10 new words a day (Reutzel and Cooter, 2000).
- One of the most important differences between children who start kindergarten prepared and those who don't is the number of words in their vocabularies.
- Research shows poor children may have 2,000 words while middle class children who have attended preschool and are frequently read and talked to by adults may have 5,000 word vocabularies.
- Children who know a wide range of words as preschoolers become better readers and writers than those with more limited early vocabularies.

These differences that children start school with will typically get worse as they get older. Therefore, it is very important to talk with, and read to, children in the early years so they can build their vocabularies and start school on an equal footing with their peers.

Talk and read to children with expression and warmth

When providers read to children, they can help them develop larger vocabularies and better reading comprehension by improving the dramatic quality of their reading and the warmth with which they read, and by their attempts to engage individual children during shared reading in a discussion about characters and events. For instance, ask children

- what they think will happen next
- about unfamiliar or new words
- about what the characters are thinking and feeling

Conversations in the child care settings also help children with social/emotional and behavioral issues. When children can be engaged and interact verbally with other children and adults they naturally feel that they are being valued, listened to and respected.

To encourage conversation in child care:

- Ask open-ended questions:

Ask questions that require the child to answer with several words, not just yes or no.

Ask questions such as "If you were a train engineer, what would you do all day?" and "If you were going to make the perfect play yard, what would you put in it?" and "If you were (a character in a story being read) what would you feel?"

Try to begin questions with "wh" words: *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, and *why* (and *how*).

- Encourage children to explain their answers. This teaches them to use more words. Some of them may be words they didn't even know they knew!
- Get down at the child's level and look him in the eyes when you talk to him.
- Be sure to listen respectfully when the child responds to your questions.

Conversations are also an important tool for assessing children for language delay. Identifying language delay and referring a child for help early may help prevent later problems in school.

References

Bardige, B. & Segal, M. (September, 2004) Conversations in Child Care. *Zero to Three*.

Reutzel, D.R. and R. Cooter. *Teaching Children to Read: Putting the Pieces Together*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 2000