



Best Practices

The early learning years are a time of rapid language growth. Children engage adults and each other in conversation that helps them explain and describe their world. They learn to express their thoughts, feelings, wants, and needs; to problem-solve; and to interact positively with peers. Children need models to help them develop these conversation skills. They also need an environment that supports language development. Educators can engage children in meaningful conversation by building in opportunities to talk, modeling conversation, and using complex language and vocabulary in “child-friendly” ways.

Build in Opportunities to Talk

To develop language and conversation skills, young children need many opportunities to talk—with each other, with adults, one-on-one, and in a group. Educators can create opportunities for children to engage in conversation throughout the day.

- **Use everyday activities as opportunities for rich conversational talk** (e.g., Circle Time, Snack Time, Story Time, and Outdoor Play).
- **Design spaces that encourage children to talk together and share ideas** (e.g., in circles, at learning centers, in outdoor play areas, etc.)
- **Ask open-ended questions to challenge children to “go deeper” as they express ideas** (e.g., Ask, *Why do you think that happened?* rather than *Did you think that would happen?*).

Why is it important to engage children in conversation?

- Conversation helps children express their thoughts, get what they need, resolve conflicts, ask for help, and learn from adults and from one another.
- Children need many opportunities to talk—with each other, with adults, one-on-one, and in groups.

How can activities, explorations, and learning spaces provide opportunities for conversation?

- Use everyday routines to provide rich opportunities for conversation. For example,
 - Circle Time or small group meetings offer daily opportunities for discussion.

Best Practices (CONTINUED)

- During Story Time, children can be prompted to talk about what they know from their own lives to make connections between their own experiences and the books they hear read aloud
- Design spaces and activities that offer opportunities for children to talk together about important ideas.
 - Learning centers can offer activities that require children to collaborate and converse. For example,
 - The Pretend and Play Center encourages children to act out scenarios in their world, such as taking on the role of a doctor or patient, a restaurant waiter or customer, or a shopper in a grocery store.
 - The Block Center gives children an opportunity to cooperatively design structures that become a railroad station, a construction site, a highway, etc.
 - Outdoor spaces and activities can encourage discussion. For instance, bring children to community gardens or plant seeds together.

What strategies can educators use to prompt children to use as many words as possible to express themselves?

- Use open-ended questions to challenge children to “go deeper” as they express ideas. For example, ask, *Why do you think that happened? What will happen next? How do you know?*
- Model language to foster communication and provide an example for how children can express feelings, tell what they are thinking, share a new idea, and solve conflicts.

Model Conversation

Young children often need concrete models to learn how to express feelings, tell what they are thinking, share a new idea, and solve conflicts. They need specific language strategies that help them ask or explain how or why something happens or to negotiate a disagreement. Educators can help by modeling exact language.

- **Model descriptive language** to foster communication and to serve as a role model. Children learn by example strategies for problem solving, negotiating conflicts, and for sharing ideas and feelings. For example, say, *Sarah, say, “Josh, I would like to use the pink crayon.”* Or, *Tell Kali that hurts your feelings.*

Best Practices (CONTINUED)

- **“Listen in” to conversations.** Be ready to supply language models when children don’t have the words they need to express themselves.
- **Provide children with frequent opportunities to work and learn with others.** During small group activities, educators can model how to use group strategies such as careful listening, looking at the person who is speaking, and asking and answering questions.

How can educators model language?

- Supply the words children need to convey their thoughts. When children are unable to express themselves, educators can model how to express feelings, tell what they are thinking, share a new idea, and solve conflicts.
- Become role models for children. Help children express emotions, thoughts, and ideas by example. For instance, say, *I have an idea. We could cut the pizza into three pieces. Who has another idea? Or, I was sad when I saw the broken truck. Tell me how it makes you feel.*
- Act out situations for problem solving. Talking through a problem or conflict helps children gain cooperative negotiation skills, while role-playing can help them learn ways to interact.
- Model group strategies. Show children how to engage with a small group through careful listening, looking at the person who is speaking, and asking and answering questions.

What other strategies can educators use to help children who have trouble communicating?

- “Listen in” to the language children use. Children come to the early childhood environment with varying levels of language. Educators can tailor their own language to address specific needs. For example, some children need entire sentences modeled; some children need help with descriptive or time words: the *round* plate, a *sunny* day, *after* school.
- Provide children with frequent opportunities to collaborate with others. During small group activities, children work and learn with others. Educators can model how to use group strategies such as careful listening, looking at the person who is speaking, and asking and answering questions.

Use Complex Language and Vocabulary

Through language, people share ideas, solve problems and conflicts, cultivate relationships, and learn new things. As children’s language abilities grow, they use fewer one-word labels and express themselves in more complex language constructions. This growth is essential—children with deep and broad vocabulary become better readers, writers, and communicators. Educators can foster this development by exposing children to complex language and vocabulary.

- **Offer new words** that children can use to grow their vocabulary.
- **Incorporate interesting and complex language.** Children need to hear sophisticated words and be prompted to use them in their own speaking vocabulary. For example, say, *That is a gigantic cloud! Look at this miniature pony. This looks like a ferocious lion.*
- **Provide “child-friendly” definitions** of complex vocabulary and encourage children to use the words in their speech. For example, say, *Now we scatter the tiles. That means we mix them up.*
- **Encourage children to define words on their own** when possible.
- **Use academic language**—the language of instruction. As they study subjects like math, reading, and science, children will need to learn these words (e.g., *longer, higher, more, fewer, predict, add, follow, alphabet*).
- **Chart children’s progress over time.** As children grow, so do the number of words they use in a sentence. A child who might once have said only “*My truck*” can grow to use a more complete sentence: “*I made a picture of a truck.*”

Why do children need to hear adults use sophisticated language?

- Children with deep and broad vocabulary become better readers, writers, and communicators.
- Children can often understand complex words that are not yet in their speaking vocabulary.

What strategies can educators use to introduce complex vocabulary?

- Flood the environment with talk to help them learn new ideas and express themselves competently and confidently.
- Model the use of new words that children can use to describe their world.
- Incorporate interesting and complex language into daily talk. Children need to hear these words and be prompted to add them in their own speaking vocabulary.

Best Practices (CONTINUED)

- Provide simple, easy-to-understand definitions of vocabulary and encourage children to use the words in conversation.
- Ask children to define words. Children often pick up the vocabulary of their peers and hearing another child's definition can have more meaning.
- Use read-aloud books to teach new vocabulary and to help children discover the meanings of the words they hear.
- Use academic language (the language of instruction) to familiarize children with words they will encounter as they learn more math, reading, science, etc. (e.g., *longer, higher, more, fewer, predict, add, follow, alphabet*).
- Ask open-ended questions to prompt children to think deeply and critically and to encourage multiple-word answers. These questions begin with words like *what* and *how* and usually cannot be answered with a simple "yes" or "no." For example, ask, *What do you predict will happen when we put the snow in the water?* Or, *What might happen when you put another block at the top?*
- Prompt children to talk with peers. Say, *Samantha has a great way to find her boots. Ask her to tell you what she does.*

Glossary

academic language: the language of instruction—specific words children learn related to subjects such as math, science, art, and so on

language/linguistic development: the process of developing language skills to understand when others speak (or use sign language) and to speak (or sign) and engage in conversation

open-ended questions: questions that require critical thinking, invite opinion or explanation, and have the potential to result in multiple-word answers

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