

Encouraging Oral Language

(Summary of suggestions from *Learning to Talk and Listen*)

Children Need Reasons to Talk and Interesting Things to Talk About

How can teachers and staff make time for talking and include it in their day? How do adults get good conversations going? Think about the “talk times” during the day. A good place to start is to talk about what the child is doing and things that interest the child.

To encourage conversation, adults should base conversations with children on activities and ideas that are of interest to the children themselves. Set up classroom and learning environments that encourage children to use interesting vocabulary and concepts.

STORYTELLING

When children can tell stories about their own lives, they try out new vocabulary, use language to organize thinking, and exercise their imaginations.

- The caregiver’s role is often to build on children’s ideas, add new words, and model sentence structure by posing questions and elaborating or extending what children say.

NEW INFORMATION

Introducing new and stimulating experiences (interesting objects, field trips) encourages talk about topics with rich, interesting content.

- Children are more likely to have extended conversations if they are talking about topics that stimulate their thinking. In addition, talking about past and future experiences—experiences that are not occurring here and now—is a crucial skill for children; it develops their capacity for abstract thinking.

PLAY

Taking on new roles in play and performance provides the opportunity to use language in new ways through songs, plays, show-and-tell, dramatic play. For example, two children in the dramatic play area are pretending to be at an office.

EXTENDED CONVERSATION

Talk to children personally, one-on-one or in a small group.

Have conversations with each child that go back and forth multiple times. Build on what the child says by adding new words or new ideas. Ask questions that encourage children to use language to express more abstract ideas, such as things from their imaginations, or predictions about things that might happen in the future.

MODELING LANGUAGE

Teachers and families should use language that includes rich vocabulary, abstract words and concepts, and a variety of grammatical forms. One important way that children learn about language is through hearing other people talk.

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