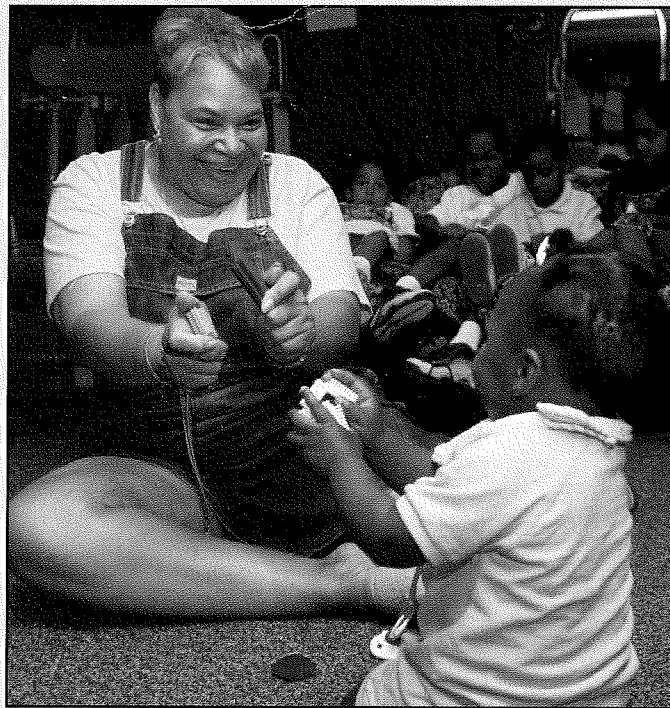




Partners With Children — Playing and Learning Together



Following Children's Leads

- ◆ Get down on the child's level.
- ◆ Observe first before speaking.
- ◆ Copy what the child is doing.
- ◆ Pause and wait for the child to take a turn.
- ◆ Follow the child's pace and interest.

Talking with Children

Enforced repetition

These statements tell children exactly what to say. The child has no choices.

- *Say "I'm sorry."*

Closed-ended questions

These questions have one correct answer. The adult is in control of the conversation.

- *What color is your shirt?*
- *How many fingers am I holding up?*

Open-ended questions

These are questions you don't know the answer to. While open-ended questions are much better than closed-ended questions, the adult is still in control of the conversation because children are answering questions on the topic decided by the adult.

- *What will you do with your Grandma when she picks you up?*
- *What will you make for your mom's birthday?*

Acknowledgments

(repeating or restating)

An acknowledgment is a word, phrase, or gesture that lets the child know you are listening to them. It might be a nod of the head or a neutral comment like "I see." Acknowledgments may also repeat or restate what the child has said. Acknowledgments are a way to share conversational control with the child because the child can respond in a way that makes sense to them.

C: I like my new shoes.

A: You like your new shoes.

C: Yeah, my granny gots them for me.

A: Your granny got them for you.

Contributions

When you make an observation or add your own related statement to a conversation, you are making a contribution. These are another way to share conversational control with children.

C: My dog licks me. That means he loves me.

A: My dog licks me too. And he wags his tail really fast.

C: And my dog sometimes barks 'cause he wants me to pet him.

A: I see you are stacking the blocks.

C: Yeah, I'm making a spaceship.

A: You've used a lot of blocks. That's a tall spaceship.

Let Them Speak! Conversing With Children

by Mary Hohmann

The more children put their own thoughts and experiences into words, the more involved they become in thinking about and interpreting their world. That's why conversing with children is one of the most important things providers do as they work with and care for young children. When adults recognize and build on daily opportunities to talk with children, oral language and comprehension develop hand-in-hand with children's work and play. Providers can use a variety of strategies that encourage children to think and talk.

Talking During Play

As a first step, it's important to look for natural opportunities for conversation. The young child who is deeply involved in play may view a provider's attempt to "strike up a conversation" as an intrusion. Yet, during almost every kind of play, there are moments when children pause or comment on what they are doing, thus creating an opening for a conversation. As you watch and listen you will find these breaks in children's play. Children who are in transition — who have completed what they were working on, who are changing their plans, or who are pausing in the midst of an activity — may welcome the chance to talk. At transition times like these, talking freely with an adult can help children think about what they have done or what they intend to do next.

A key to play-related talk is to consider the *type of play* that is happening. Common types of play, studied and described by developmental psychologist Doris Bergen (1988), offer a variety of conversational opportunities.

Exploratory play, in which children explore the functions and properties of materials and tools, is a relatively simple kind of play that doesn't always lend itself to play-related conversation. If 3-year-old Kevin is cutting, pasting, going back and forth on a swing, or rolling clay with his hands, he may or may not feel the need to explain or comment on what he is doing. However, because of its repetitive quality, exploratory play often offers a relaxed occasion for the child to

initiate a conversation about a topic of personal interest like a new pet or a recent visit with Grandma. The teacher who is pushing a child on a swing or rolling clay next to a child who is also rolling clay often receives a spontaneous update on the latest events in the child's life.

In **constructive play**, the child makes or builds something. In contrast to exploratory play, this more goal-oriented play usually presents an opportunity for talk that is related to the activity. During constructive play, children may pause to take a look at what they have done, to consider how to solve a problem, or simply to seek acknowledgment of what they've done so far. A brief conversation with an adult can be helpful at these times. However, it's important for providers who want to converse with children during constructive play to wait for the child to pause. If the child is very engrossed in making something, an adult's comments may simply be disruptive.

Pretending usually involve lots of role-related conversation among children. A provider who takes part in the pretend play — by assuming a role related to the ongoing play or taking on a role assigned by the players — will generally be included in these conversations.

Playing games (including action games like tag, or quiet games like card games or simple board games) is another common kind of play for young children. Such games often involve verbal negotiations over how to proceed and what to do next, and these are natural conversational opportunities.

Sharing Conversational Control

Once a conversation is underway, the next step is sharing rather than assuming conversational control. To understand this idea, let's take a look at a ground-breaking study by British researchers David Wood, Linnet McMahon, and Yvonne Cranstoun (1980). They observed 24 nursery school teachers and playgroup leaders, and the teachers and playgroup leaders themselves tape-recorded over 1,500 minutes of their conversations with children.

Wood and his colleagues found that providers varied widely in their conversational styles. Not surprisingly, some styles were much more effective than others in eliciting language from children:

Some adults manage to get children asking a relatively large number of questions, encourage them to elaborate freely in their response to their questions, and, in general, prompt [children] to play active, productive roles in dialogue. Other [adults] are much more likely to receive only monosyllabic, terse, and somewhat reluctant [verbal] offerings from children, despite a similar investment of time, effort, and dedication. Why? (pp. 52–53)

The researchers answered this question by looking at who was in control in adult-child conversational exchanges, and creating a framework to describe five types of conversational moves or turns they observed:

Speaker retains control: Conversational moves 1–3

- Enforced repetition (“Say ‘Night, night’ to baby.” “Say please.”)
- Closed question (“Is your baby crying?” “How old are you?”)
- Open question (“What are you doing with your baby?” “What can you tell me about your picture?”)

Speaker passes control to listener: Conversational moves 4–5

- Contribution (“I used to take my baby to the park.” “I’m making a tower, too.”)
- Acknowledgment (“I see.” “Uh-huh.” “Oh, you’re going shopping with your baby.”)

Using this coding system to analyze adult-child conversations, they found that when adults used conversational moves 4 and 5, they were far more effective at fostering discussion with children than when they used moves 1, 2, or 3. When providers used moves 4 or 5, children often responded by making contributions or asking questions of their own; this often led to further

discussion by the child. When providers used moves 1, 2, and 3, however, children tended to respond dutifully but briefly — then the conversations usually died.

Thus, as the researchers concluded, adult conversational strategies have a strong impact on the quantity and quality of child language.

The key lesson of this study for providers is clear: To encourage child talk, it is important to avoid asking children frequent questions and instead to use our turns in conversation to make acknowledgments or personal contributions.

Conversation Strategies

Once you become aware of conversational opportunities and the role of acknowledgments and contributions, you can make the most of them by using the following strategies:

- **Join children at their level.** At its best, conversation is a personal exchange between trusting people. For such conversations to occur, you'll want to position yourself at the child's physical level. This may mean squatting, kneeling, sitting, and occasionally even lying on the floor. This way, children are not "looking up" to you, and you are not "looking down" on children.
- **Wait for the child to open a conversation and respond to children's conversational leads.** After you have joined children silently and positioned yourself at their level, you can make yourself available for conversation by remaining attentive and listening patiently and with interest to any ongoing talk among children. When providers take this approach, children are apt to address them directly or invite them into an ongoing discussion. For example, an adult noticed that 5-year-old Tina, who was making a collage, had paused and was studying her handiwork. The adult approached her, squatted down, and looked at the collage. Tina then made the first conversational move, saying, "This is for my mom." The adult responded with the acknowledgment "Oh, something for your mom," and a conversation was under way.

Note how the provider in the following example lets the child set the agenda for conversation by using many comments and statements of acknowledgment. Though the provider does open the conversation, it is with a comment directly related to interests the child is expressing through his actions:

Max is watching the fish in a tank. The provider squats down next to Max and watches for a while. Then Max points to one fish.

Provider: You're pointing to the fish.

Max: He's waiting for his daddy.

Provider: Oh, he's waiting.

Max: See that big one down there? He's the daddy, and he's waitin' for him so they can go around together.

Provider: I see.

Max: They both have those tails like that. Pointy. That's how you know.

Provider: Oh, the pointy tails mean they go together.

Max: Yeah, that means they're the boy and the daddy. Once I got lost.

Provider: Oh, dear!

Max: I couldn't find my daddy. He finded me.

Provider: He didn't want to lose you.

Max: [Pointing to fish.] Now they're together.

Provider: Like you and your daddy.

Max: Uh-huh. There they go.

- **Use comments or observations as conversational openers.** Though waiting for the child to open a conversation is often the most effective strategy, it's sometimes appropriate for the provider to make the first conversational move. To invite a child to talk with you, begin with a comment or an observation, rather than a question. This gives the child control over his or her response and, consequently, over the direction of the conversation. Note how the provider uses nondemanding comments as conversational openers in the following two examples:

[Emma, a preschooler, brushes the coat of a fluffy stuffed dog.]

Provider: My dog, Stanley, likes to have his coat brushed.

Emma: So does my doggie. He hates baths

* * *

[Tyson, a 4-year-old, is standing at the workbench with a car he has made.]

Provider: You made a very long car, Tyson.

Tyson: I got this long piece and this other piece on top.

Provider: Yes.

Tyson: These are the wheels

- **Converse as a partner with children.** Once you have been asked into a dialogue with children, it's important to resist taking control of the conversation. Look for opportunities to give conversational control to the child. You can do this by staying with the topic the child raises and making personal contributions ("I've made a snake, too") or statements of acknowledgment ("Oh," "Uh-huh," "I see"). These kinds of comments and statements allow the conversation to continue without pressuring the child for a response. Once you've made a comment, it's also important to wait patiently for the child to respond before taking another conversational turn — young children need lots of time to choose their words.

As the conversation with Tina discussed previously continues, note how the provider uses these strategies to encourage Tina to describe her plans and activities:

Tina: [speaking of the collage she's making for her mom] It's . . . it's not done.

Provider: Oh.

Tina: I'm gonna put some of that twisty stuff on right here and those things he's got.

Provider: You mean the acorn tops like Ryan's using?

Tina: Yeah! Acorn tops. We picked 'em up, didn't we?

Provider: Yes. We found the acorn tops on our walk.

Tina: An' Linda found that stick, and you jumped over it!

Provider: YOU did, too!

Tina: Yep! [Pauses.] I'm gonna put a stick on and those tops. A lot! [Turns back to her work.]

Provider: I'll come back to see what it looks like with the twisty stuff and the stick and the acorn tops. [Moves toward another child.]

- **Ask questions sparingly and responsively.** Too many adult questions can dampen conversation with young children by keeping the provider in control of the conversation. However, thoughtful adult questions — if used sparingly — can sometimes lead to a rich dialogue with children. Questions that discourage conversation tend to be questions about facts the questioner already knows (What color is that? Which board is longer? Is that a house?), or questions unrelated to the situation at hand (Child is coloring. Provider asks, “How’s your new baby brother?”). On the other hand, when questions are asked out of genuine curiosity and relate directly to what the child is doing, they may foster discussion.

Among the most productive kinds of questions are those that encourage children to describe their thinking (for example, How can you tell? How do you know that? What do you think made that happen? How did you get [the ball] to . . . ? What do you think would happen if . . . ?) When a question grows out of the immediate situation, it is more apt to add to rather than take away from the flow of conversation. For example, in a continuation of the conversation with Max discussed earlier, the provider asks a question that grows out of the conversation:

Max: That fish only gots one eye.

Provider: How can you tell?

Max: 'Cause look. That's all you can see.

Provider: I see. You can see only one eye.

Max: Yeah, one eye right on the side up by his nose.

The question “How can you tell?” (a response to the child’s observation that the fish has one eye) asks the child to describe his thinking. Only the child has the answer to this question, so it’s

a question well worth asking. Furthermore, in the process of answering questions children have the opportunity to consolidate what they know and how they know it.

In short, children are more apt to talk, more likely to think out loud, more ready to wonder about things and answer their own questions when they have control over the content and direction of their conversations with providers. Use questions sparingly with children. By making noncontrolling conversational moves (comments, observations, and acknowledgments) instead of asking questions, providers are likely to elicit more language, of a higher level, from children.

This doesn't mean you should give up on questioning children altogether, although you may want to do so for several days, just to find out for yourself how using fewer questions can influence the amount and quality of children's language.

In family child care homes that promote children's oral language development, each child's voice can and should be heard. Taking advantage of conversational openings during play, offering personal comments and acknowledgments, and asking questions sparingly are ways you can help children reflect on what they are doing in their own words.

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