

## The “Art” of Conversing with Children

Adults’ skills in carrying on meaningful and facilitative conversations with young children is reflective of how highly developed she/he is in the “*Art of Teaching*”. Many consider holding conversations to be the primary teaching technique of early childhood educators, however, language facilitation during play is a technique which must be developed over time. Facilitating language and higher order thinking skills must be intentionally and explicitly implemented in an implicit way during play.

Research shows that teachers tend to display “verbal domination” in their language behavior in the classroom, and that their instructional approach tends to be “linear” (e.g., one-way questions, one-way response), rather than reciprocal (e.g., open-ended questions with two or three way responses between adult and child; Dickinson, et al, 2004).

One way for a teacher to assess how he/she is doing is to have another person videotape a play session during center time. Listen for the number of times you:

- Use open-ended questions
- Describe the child’s actions
- Repeat what the child said and added a little more information
- Comment on an object and described its function, size, shape, or other meaningful attribute.

Reflect on the **quality** of the conversation, as well as the length of verbal interaction.



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Visit NC’s Preschool Demonstration Programs. For more information: <http://www.governor.state.nc.us/Office/Education/Home.asp> under training and conferences.

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# Promoting Oral Language Development in a High-Quality, Inclusive Preschool Learning Environment



## A guide for Administrators, Teachers, and Families

“Everyday activities of all sorts, accompanied by interesting talk with lots of new vocabulary play an important part in children’s language and literacy development.”

—Dickinson & Tabors, 2001, p. 330

# Promoting Oral Language Development

## Hold Real Conversations

One of the most effective strategies for enhancing vocabulary development and comprehension of language beyond the word level is to hold at least one “real” conversation that enhances vocabulary and language development with each child every day. A “real” conversation is described as being of interest to the child and **having 3-4 turns** or exchanges between the adult and child (Roskos, Tabors, & Lenhart, 2004).

### Strategies

- Make time and develop the confidence and skills to hold conversations with young children on a regular basis (Hart & Risely, 2003; Pianta et al., 2005).
- Converse about books, songs, stories, and experiences
- Use children’s interests as a basis for conversation
- Speak courteously to children
- Plan or take advantage of spontaneous opportunities to talk with each child informally
- Refrain from talking judgmentally about children/others to them or in front of them
- Show affection and sincere interest in children
- Send consistent verbal and non verbal messages
- Invite children into extended conversations with peers and adults
- Listen attentively to what children have to say

## Follow the CAR

Notari-Syverson, Maddox, & Cole (1999) developed a training videotape for adults to learn how to talk with children ages two-to-five as they talk together. They suggest “Following the **CAR**” when talking with young children:

- **C**omment on what the child is looking at, touching or talking about and **WAIT FIVE SECONDS**;
- **A**sk questions about what the child is looking at, touching, or talking about in a book and **WAIT FIVE SECONDS**;
- **R**espond by adding a little more to the child’s response.

Resources for obtaining this training video, “Language is the Key: Talking and Books” which describes the “Following the CAR” strategy, include [www.wri.org](http://www.wri.org); [www.wri-edu.org/bookplay](http://www.wri-edu.org/bookplay); <http://www.ncei-eclibrary.org/>; Preschool Demonstration Program (list available at <http://www.governor.state.nc.us/Office/Education/Home.asp> under training and conferences).



## Encourage Rather Than Praise

As humans we are encouraged to continue learning about something when another person is truly engaged in what we are doing, saying, thinking, or feeling. Saying “good job” or “I like that” does not imply that we are interested or engaged in a child’s play or conversation. Many times these words signal the **end** of our time of engagement, rather than provoking the next level of inquiry about a learning/play event. The deeper we become engaged in a child’s inquiry based play/learning, the more profound the impact will be on that child’s understanding about the words, meanings, and social-conversational rules. There is much power in high levels of teacher engagement and conversation; while difficult to describe, many teachers refer to these times as “teachable moments”. What we might see a teacher doing during these “teachable moments”:

- Sitting with the children at their eye level, observing them play.
- Listening to the children’s dialog about the activity and following their line of thought in the action.
- Setting up something novel in the play situation that might cause “a problem”, and then asking “I wonder what will happen.....”.
- Describing the child’s actions, “Oh, now you’re putting the red car in the garage.....uh, oh, it doesn’t seem to fit in that space, now you’re trying another space” .....
- Encourage children to describe their feelings during situation, “That leggo just doesn’t seem to fit, boy I can see you have a funny look on your face, how does this make you feel?”



## Think About What We Say, How We Say It

Adults help build children’s understanding and use of appropriate word order and increase their vocabulary by “thinking before speaking”. We add more to a child’s language development and enhance their self esteem by encouraging them in these ways:

- Participate in children’s play
- Encourage children to describe their efforts, ideas, and products
- Acknowledge children’s work and ideas by making specific comments: describe (not all at once):
- Physical movement, control of tools, use of space, self-help-skills in working on a project, control or expression of emotions, vocabulary to describe the product, writing associated with creations; math and science concepts, revealed self-identity, interactions.

*High/Scope Education Research Foundation; Nilsen, B. (2001). Week by Week: Plans for Observing and Recording Young Children.*

## Intentionally Talk about Words and What they Mean

1. Don’t be afraid to introduce children to interesting “big” words related to literacy, math, science, past and future events.
2. Point to illustrations, objects to help children understand.
3. Provide brief definitions.
4. Use synonyms, “it’s like a...”
5. Use gestures.
6. Use the word in different sentences at different times and in different contexts.

(Collins, M.F., 2005)