

Keeping the conversation going

When a child is an active participant in shared, extended conversations, they take more opportunities to talk, their talk is more complex, and educators provide a positive model for oral language use. Oral language is embedded across the Early Years Learning Framework and is central to educator's work. This tip sheet provides educators with evidence-informed strategies to sustain and extend conversations with children aged 2-5 years.

Make it personal

Children will contribute more to conversations if their own experiences, ideas and interests are the focus. You can help a child make personal connections to current events by:

- Creating space and time to link conversations to their own experiences.
- Following their lead to identify and incorporate their interests.
- Making connections to their world to personalise conversations.
- Encouraging ideas and opinions to indicate that contributions are valued.

Research provides examples of strategies that can support personalising conversations with children:

See and speak:

Learning stories and photographs are used as the focus of conversations. Two strategies to promote children's talk include the 'Reminiscing Approach' and the 'Book Reading Approach'.



The 'Reminiscing Approach'

- Educators prompt the child to use their memory to tell a story about the experience.
- Encourages a child to talk more and produce more complex talk.

The 'Book Reading Approach'

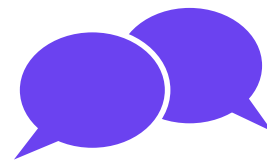
- Educators read the learning story as if it were a story book.
- Exposes a child to more complex speech from the educator.



Varying your approaches enables a child to have opportunity to talk more and also to hear more complex speech.

Speak and say more:

Second stories and pivots have been shown to connect children's own lives and experiences to conversations.



Second stories

- Second stories are offered after a first story is given by one person (either educator or child): e.g. "I went to the beach on the weekend."
- A second story follows when another person makes a personal connection and offers their story: e.g. "I also went to the beach on the weekend and I saw dolphins diving in the water."

Pivots

- Pivots connect an immediate event to a personal experience.
- Three steps to a pivot:



Step 1: An immediate event	E.g. Making fruit salad
Step 2: Child makes a personal connection	"I've made fruit salad at home with my dad."
Step 3: Educator builds on this connection to promote the child's further talk	"I wonder what fruit you used in your fruit salad?"



Experiment with linking

- Experiment with both the 'Reminiscing Approach' and the 'Book Reading Approach' when talking with children about their learning stories.
- Take a sequence of photos from the start to the end of projects, so that children can revisit and provide a commentary on the experience with others.
- Find out about children's lives outside of the service. Talk with parents about family experiences and

children's interests so that you can draw on this knowledge to make personal connections when talking with a child (e.g. when reading a book about boats, you might make a personal connection to a child that has a boat to encourage them to tell their story).

- Encourage children to provide a second story or use a pivot at different times and contexts during the day (e.g. when reading stories to children, when sitting with them at mealtimes).



Ways to respond to children

Your response to children's talk can close down the conversation or promote shared conversations that continue over a number of turns.

A variety of strategies can be used to encourage a child's continued engagement in conversations:



- **Repeat** or copy the child's talk or gesture and then pause.
- **Build onto** what a child says, rather than changing topics.
- **Use statements**, rather than asking question after question.
E.g. "Ah, you've seen the rainbow lorikeet sitting in the tree", or "Your building is really high!"
- **Follow with a question** that encourages their explanation or opinion.
E.g. "Why do you think that may happen?" or "What are your thoughts about going outside when it's raining?"
- **Paraphrase** a child's talk modelling more complex language.
E.g. If a child says, "Look there's a bird", you could say, "Oh yes, I can see the lorikeet in the tree. It reminds me of a rainbow."
- **Pause** or wait before responding after a child talks.
Please refer to the tip sheet *Creating spaces for children's talk* for more information on the power of pauses.



A word of warning

Be wary of 'judging' children's talk as 'right' or 'wrong'. Assessments can prevent children's contributions to conversations and close down discussions.

Experiment with responses



- **Experiment** with varying your responses.
- **Avoid relying too heavily on questions.** A 'question, answer, question, answer, question, answer' pattern makes the interaction more like a test rather than a genuine conversation.
- **Aim for genuine conversation**, which feel more real-life (e.g. the type of conversation that would happen over a cup of tea with a friend).
- **Try different prompts** to encourage a child to explain their ideas or provide their opinions such as: "what do you think about...", "I'm interested to hear more", "tell me more".

Active listening

Active listening shows a child that what they have to say is important. This helps a child to maintain joint attention and to offer more complex thoughts and ideas to a conversation as it unfolds. Show children their contributions are valued by:

- Using verbal and non-verbal cues including:
 - Making eye contact
 - Nodding
 - Using short verbal cues such as "mmm", "yes" to show you are listening
 - Facial expressions (e.g. surprise, concern) and gestures (e.g. shrugging)
- Allowing a child's interest to steer the conversation by building onto a child's contribution in your response.



An experiment, not a recipe... The strategies described in this tip sheet are 'something to experiment with' as tools in your interaction toolkit to be drawn upon when you are trying to keep the conversation going. Understanding how your interactions - such as the language you use - can help you to select those most appropriate for achieving your teaching goals.

Key references

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