

First Steps Toward Literacy: When Talk Isn't Idle

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Children's early experiences with speech and conversation provide them with essential knowledge that supports later literacy development. Researchers have found that children develop language skills through their conversational interactions with parents and teachers. Reading skill is built on this awareness of spoken language.

A reciprocal relationship exists between oral language development and early literacy. As Sue Bredekamp writes in the foreword to *Beginning Literacy and Language*, "Of course, we have always known for some time that these two critical learning areas are interrelated. But over the years our understanding of that relationship has been transformed. In the past it was assumed that the primary task of children in the preschool years was exclusively language development. It was thought that children first developed language during the years prior to schooling and then learned reading and writing when formal education began in kindergarten or first grade."

Obviously though, children don't start kindergarten with a blank slate. During the preschool years and earlier, children are absorbing information about the world around them, including early knowledge of language and literacy. Educators have come to recognize that children acquire important literacy skills beginning at birth, and that success in grade school reading is largely dependent on how much children have learned before they get there.

Each child comes to preschool with a different amount of literacy experience: some can write their names, some may already be able to decode particular words, some may enjoy "reading" a favorite book by retelling its story while flipping pages. Teachers need to recognize that all of these activities are part of children's emerging literacy. The teacher's job is to build upon the child's present skills and challenge them to an even higher level.

Many types of oral language experiences contribute to children's language and literacy development. Chief among these experiences are conversations. In analyzing what makes a conversation beneficial to literacy development, researchers David Dickinson and Patton Tabors make the distinction between contextualized and decontextualized conversations. Contextualized conversation is tied to the immediate environment. We use this type of language when we say things like "Put that in your backpack" or "Eat your

snack." This kind of language is simple and it omits important features that are integral to reading.

Contextualized language is also the language most frequently used by teachers. In one Head Start study, Alyssa McCabe and David Dickinson found that 60 percent of classroom conversations were discussions about ongoing activities while another 11 percent of conversations were focused on controlling children. Only 7 percent of conversations were considered beneficial to literacy development. Similarly, in reviewing data from the Home-School Study, Dickinson (2001) found that "only 20 percent or less of the time children talked with adults in preschool was spent in conversations that went beyond the here and now. The rest of the time teachers were giving directions or asking children for specific information, such as the names of colors or letters."

When we write, read, and have conversations beneficial to literacy development, we want to use decontextualized language. This is language that is not tied to the immediate context. It may reflect past events, future events, or fictitious events. For example, decontextualized language is used in everyday dinnertime conversation, when adults tell stories of their childhood, or when children tell about their school day. This type of language requires children to use their developing mental abilities to represent ideas, a process that is important to the development of reading comprehension.

The thirteen-year Harvard-sponsored longitudinal Home-School Study of Language and Literacy Development (Catherine E. Snow, Co-Principal Investigator; David K. Dickinson, Co-Principal Investigator; and Patton O. Tabors, Research Coordinator) has documented a strong connection between early reading success and the amount of decontextualized talk children engage in with adults, in both homes and schools. Simply put, this means conversation that relies on language to convey information about other times and places. Decontextualized conversations typically occur when an adult interactively reads a book with a child: the two stop to discuss what the book means instead of the adult passively reciting the text word for word.

In addition to using decontextualized language, beneficial conversations have the following attributes:

- A balance of teacher and child input (turn taking)
- Attentive listening
- Extended discourse that stays on a topic of interest to a child
- Vocabulary that is introduced in a focused way.

Learning language takes practice by children. So too, does it take practice by adults to use decontextualized language in their conversations with children. When teachers engage children in meaningful dialogue, children expand their oral language skills. As Burns, Griffin, and Snow (1999) state, "Vocabulary, language skills, and knowledge about the world are

acquired during interesting conversations with responsive adults. Talking about books, about daily happenings, or even about what happened in day care or at work, not only contributes to children's vocabularies, but also increases their ability to understand stories and explanations and increases their understanding of how things work—all skills that will be important in early reading" (pp. 8-9).

In contrast, issuing commands is not apt to generate conversation and stimulate oral language skills. A child is less likely to respond to "Stop that!" than he is to the inquiry, "Doug, why are you dropping raisins on the floor?" Unless there is an emergency situation, there is no real reason for teachers to resort to peremptory commands. When children are comfortable with their teachers and their environment, they will become receptive to the learning experiences their teachers introduce. Similarly, if children feel threatened or constrained, they will likely be inhibited in all areas of interaction with their teacher, especially in their conversations.

Unfortunately, many adults pay little attention to children's conversations and ideas. Young children are unrefined speakers, often taking a long time to make a point or repeating ideas over again. Teachers need to show children that they respect them by attentively listening to their conversations. When children interact with teachers who provide eye contact, allow them the time they need to respond (some less talkative children may need a pause of several seconds in turn-taking conversation to formulate their responses), and respond with cues such as repeating key points of the children's statements, children will both gain confidence in their conversational skills and feel more comfortable around their teachers. When it comes to young children, all talk is good talk.

References:

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