

Let's talk! Having meaningful conversations with children

by Dr Anne Kennedy

One of the most important responsibilities for child care professionals is to engage all children in meaningful conversations to support their learning. As social beings, children learn best through participation and communication with others. While children's participation in learning experiences can take different forms, conversations with others during these experiences provide support for their learning (Rogoff, 2003; Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004). Conversations are a key element in a range of communication and interaction processes within child care services.

The importance of two-way communication

Respectful conversations with children, involving reciprocity or two-way communication processes of careful listening, appropriate responses and balanced contributions, assist child care professionals to:

- Learn more about each child's interests, skills and family experiences which can inform planning decisions
- Better understand the ways children think and reason
- Support children's development especially in the areas of communication, cognition and socialisation



This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles:	1.1, 2.2, 3.1 – 3.4 and 3.6
OSHCQA Principles:	1.1, 1.2, 2.2, 2.3, 4.2, 5.1 and 5.3
QIAS Principles:	1.1 – 1.5, and 4.1 – 4.3

- Enjoy mutually rewarding experiences when time is allowed for unhurried conversations with children
- Facilitate a sense of group belonging by talking with children about the meaning of group membership.

If children seem reluctant or unable to initiate conversations, child care professionals can help to facilitate this by looking for opportunities when they can sit quietly with a child and initiate an interaction. A child care professional can encourage a child in what they are doing, or talk aloud about something they might be planning. For example:

- 'I've been thinking about how we could make the book corner more comfortable for readers like you'
- 'I really like the way that you have worked out how to keep the blocks from falling down in your building'.

Asking too many questions of reluctant communicators may overwhelm them. Respect should be shown for children who are hesitant or uncomfortable with verbal interactions by enabling them to be listeners in conversations or allowing them to make non-verbal responses such as nodding their head or smiling, or for older children, taking or making a record of conversations.

Cultural differences in communication

Everywhere, people use words, silence, gestures and gaze skilfully to communicate. Yet there also appear to be important differences in how much people talk and in how articulately they communicate nonverbally. Perhaps more important,



communities vary in their preferences for circumstances and ways they use speech and nonverbal communication (Rogoff, 2003, p.310).

In some communities children are not expected to participate verbally in conversations, but they are immersed in conversations as listeners and observers. Child care professionals can acknowledge and respect these cultural differences in communication. For example, in some cultures it is disrespectful for children to make eye contact when conversing with an adult, while in other cultures the opposite is true.

When children are learning to speak English as a second language, it is important to respect their need to remain silent as they gradually learn about the sounds and conventions of spoken English (Siraj-Blatchford & Clarke, 2000). Over time children will learn that there are variations in the ways that people communicate or converse and they will understand which conventions apply in different social contexts.

Conversing non-verbally

From birth babies are intensely interested in, and capable of, keeping adults engaged and conversing with them by making noises, gestures and using facial expressions. Toddlers use an increasing range of verbal and non-verbal strategies to ensure adults connect with them through shared conversations (Birckmayer, Kennedy & Stonehouse, 2008).

With very young children, or children with communication disorders, most communication is

not based on sentences or words, but on gestures, signs, body language and facial expressions. Child care professionals need to 'read' and respond to these individual communication efforts. When children experience being respected as communicators they are often motivated to attempt further communication with others.

Children's non-verbal communication can be supported or initiated by:

- Acknowledging and responding to children's non-verbal communication strategies – 'I can see by your smile that you are really interested in that red truck – would you like to play with it?'
- Initiating non verbal interaction strategies – 'I like to clap my hands when I listen to this music. Clap your hands with me as we listen to the music'
- Sustaining non-verbal communication – 'That is a very big dog you have pointed to. Can you point to a small dog? Yes, you have found a very small dog!'
- Encouraging children's non-verbal experimentation with sounds and combining sounds with actions – 'Buzz went the bees, buzz, buzz, buzz. Let's all make the bees' noise as we fly around. Buzz, buzz, buzz'
- Gaining a child's interest in an interactive experience by attracting their attention using conversation and actions – 'Oh Mia, look at what I have found on my hand, a tiny, tiny ant! Can you see it crawling up my arm?'

Some of these strategies would also be appropriate for children with communication disorders. For example, research has shown that children with autism may lack the ability to initiate or participate in joint attention experiences which is a critical social competence skill (Kilham, 2009).

Conversations for learning

Our research has shown that positive cognitive outcomes are closely associated with adult-child interactions of the kind that involve some element of 'sustained shared thinking'. While it seems clear that these sustained cognitive engagements make a real difference to children's cognitive progress achieved by the settings, this does not suggest that most of the children's time needs to be dominated or led by adults (Siraj-Blatchford & Sylva, 2004, p.720).

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'Sustained shared thinking' can be supported by engaging in meaningful conversations with children. This requires closely observing children when they are participating in playful learning to determine when to become directly involved in sustaining or extending the play rather than merely observing it. It also means initiating conversations with individuals or small groups which involve cognitive effort by both adults and children. Children responding to adult verbal directions ('don't put it there') or listening to praise statements ('good boy') are not participating in meaningful conversations that sustain shared thinking between them and adults.

There are many ways to plan and sustain conversations which can support children's thinking and learning. These include:

- Moving down to children's level to show that you are really listening to them as they talk about what they are doing and what they are learning
- Using open ended questions and comments to extend or scaffold children's thinking and engagement. Open ended questions require more than a 'yes' or 'no' answer. Some examples of questions which might open up conversations with children to extend their thinking include: 'How did you...?', 'Why do you think that happened?' and 'What did it feel like when...?'
- Planning experiences based on children's interests. When children are interested in experiences they are more likely to be engaged and able to talk about their thinking, actions and what they are learning
- Providing play-based learning experiences which require conversations in order to participate. Imaginative and creative play experiences require children to think, problem solve and co-construct new learning, all of which are assisted by conversations with others

- Making connections between children's current and past learning experiences – 'remember last week and how ...' – as this connecting helps them to build on what they know and to find solutions
- Suggesting alternative points of view – 'maybe princesses aren't always beautiful', which can challenge children's thinking and stimulate new ideas.

Teaching children specific communication skills

There are a range of teaching strategies to support and extend the skills that will help children to become effective and ethical communicators. These include:

- Modelling positive behaviours. For example, how to think, listen, speak, and take turns in conversations when talking with adults and with other children
- 'Gate-keeping' to ensure that everyone has a turn to speak and to contribute to the conversation so that children learn how to be respectful communicators
- Coaching by providing children with suggestions such as 'I don't think Davis can hear you well, you could use a louder voice or move closer to him to explain what you mean'
- Allowing children time to respond to comments or questions to promote an understanding that thinking takes time, and that this is okay.

Conclusion

Meaningful conversations with children support their learning about identity, attachment, belonging, relationships and understanding about the world, as well as their capacity for thinking. Meaningful conversations also help children to develop the communication skills for active participation in their communities and for life-long learning ■

References and further reading

- Birckmayer, J., Kennedy, A., & Stonehouse, A. (2008). *From lullabies to literature: Stories in the lives of infants and toddlers*. Washington, DC: NAEYC & Castle Hill, NSW: Pademelon Press.
- Kilham, C. (2009). Understanding Asperger syndrome in early childhood. *Every Child*, 15(2), 10 – 11.
- Rogoff, B. (2003). *The cultural nature of human development*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Clarke, P. (2000). *Supporting identity, diversity and language in the early years*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I., & Sylva, K. (2004). Researching pedagogy in English pre-schools. *British Educational Research Journal*, 30(5), 713 – 730.

Useful websites

- AutismHelp.info: www.autismhelp.info/main.htm
- FKA – Free Kindergarten Association: www.fka.com.au