



Conversations: Background Information

A language-rich environment is one in which adults and children have extended conversations about interesting topics, using sophisticated vocabulary to convey complex messages. These conversations happen regularly, and the same topics can be visited on several occasions.¹

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Key Messages

I. Conversations develop oral language skills, a key to literacy.

Written language is based on spoken language. Children's experiences with speech and conversation provide essential knowledge that supports later reading development. Children develop the ability to reflect on and talk about language through interactions with family members, teachers, and more competent peers. Reading skill is built on this awareness of spoken language.

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, some researchers 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 “Get your coat” or “Eat your snack.” This kind of language is simple, and it leaves out important features of language that are integral to reading.
- ⇒ **Decontextualized** conversation uses language that is not tied to the immediate context. This language may reflect past, future, or make-believe 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 cognitive abilities to understand stories and represent ideas; this process is important to the development of reading comprehension.



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



- ⇒ A balance of adult and child input, with all participants taking their turn.
- ⇒ Attentive listening.
- ⇒ Extended discussion on a topic of interest to a child.

II. Daily activities are ideal opportunities for having conversations with children.

Young children have an egocentric view of the world and enjoy topics that relate to them directly. Therefore, social conversation about families, pets, and things that children like and dislike will be more appealing than conversation about the weather or the origin of milk.



There are many opportunities for the everyday casual, interactive social conversation that builds children's oral language skills. For example:

- ⇒ Dramatic (pretend) play: Inventive, imaginative play with toys leads to inventive, imaginative conversations that promote literacy skills. For example, when a child looks up from playing with a toy truck and says, "This is the best one," a provider can respond in many ways. Saying, "Yes, it certainly is shiny," however, will generate less conversation than asking, "It's a nice truck. But why is it the best one?"
- ⇒ Book reading: Book reading is a prime opportunity for engaging in decontextualized conversations. It is one of the few activities in which language is already in the forefront. Children must attend to the language independent of any other activities. Book reading further supports language growth when it is supplemented by conversations about the story being read. Children need to re-enact stories, reread the book alone or with a friend, and discuss the stories at lunch with friends or providers. Simply reading books straight through or departing from the text for extensive dialogue with children is not recommended.
- ⇒ Mealtimes: Snacks and meals are particularly appropriate settings because they are by their nature social gatherings where people tend to talk to each other. Meals are times to reflect on what has happened during the day, or just talk about issues that may be on one's mind.

Finding ideal opportunities when children are motivated to have conversations is especially important for children with language delays. They are less likely to start conversations on their own and benefit from situations that engage them.

Second-language learners will especially benefit from repeated exposure to everyday vocabulary they may not hear in their homes. Also, second-language learners feel more confident speaking about topics they find exciting.



III. Conversations lead to vocabulary development.

Child language research shows that the **number of conversations** and the **variety of words** that children hear affect the speed of their language growth. Children who are exposed to more words, and more unusual words, in their conversations with adults tend to develop larger vocabularies.

Providers can help children acquire a larger vocabulary and build their oral-language skills by exposing them to a wide variety of experiences, both in and out of the home. These experiences are especially important for children with developmental delays and second-language learners because it gives them more support and opportunities to be excited about and comfortable speaking. For example:

- ⇒ **Mealtime conversations** expose children to rare words in contexts that help them figure out what they mean. For example, while cooking lunch, a provider might say she needs a “colander” to drain the water from a pot of spaghetti; this provides a meaningful context for an unfamiliar word.
- ⇒ **Field trips and other special events** provide children with new vocabulary and knowledge. Learning is maximized when providers lay the groundwork beforehand (e.g., reading a relevant book or showing a video to help construct initial ideas about what a place is like and what goes on there). Giving children some appropriate vocabulary and information in advance usually heightens attentiveness during the trip. Providers can invite children to predict what they will be seeing and hearing, record their ideas, and revisit these ideas upon their return.
- ⇒ **Routines** offer many opportunities for interaction. For example, times when children are getting ready for a nap or while adults and children do chores together—such as wiping the table before a snack—are great opportunities to initiate conversations.
- ⇒ **Play time** is a good opportunity to hold conversations. Some children are more interested in talking when they have something concrete to talk about such as toys and materials. One advantage of this strategy is that a child who may be reluctant to talk can take nonverbal and verbal turns. For example, while Ms. Johnson plays and talks with Leon (who is 3 1/2 years old) about blocks, she says, “Your tower is very tall.” Leon responds by placing another block on his tower. She makes another comment: “Now it's even taller.” This time he responds verbally, “It's the tallest tower in the world.”

*(See the **Conversation Tips and Activities** [handout](#) for more information.)*



IV. Providers both model and teach conversational skills.

Conversations are both verbal and nonverbal interactions between two or more people. Learning to be a conversational partner is similar to learning how to play a game that is governed by rules. The rules of conversation may vary in different cultures, but they generally include taking turns, paying attention to the speaker, adding to the topic being discussed, and letting others know when leaving the conversation.

It is essential that providers talk, sing, and share language with even the youngest babies. As children grow, they can handle more complex conversations.

Frequent exposure to conversations and a variety of oral-language opportunities will especially support second-language learners, reinforcing and expanding their language development.

*(See the **What Do Young Children Know About Conversation?** handout for more information.)*

At about 18 months, most children speak in short sentences. They are ready to learn how to be equal and active conversational partners. Their first conversations are with an adult. Soon they can converse with another child or a small group. By talking with adults and peers, children gradually learn the following conversational skills:

- ⇒ When to start or join a conversation:
 - Say something to someone.
 - Wait for a response.
- ⇒ When someone else is speaking:
 - Look at the person.
 - Listen to what the person is saying.
 - Wait until the person has finished before responding.
- ⇒ When it is their turn to speak:
 - Add some information related to what the previous speaker said.
 - Ask questions if they do not understand what someone said.
 - Stick to the topic being discussed.
 - Keep it short so someone else can have a turn.
- ⇒ When they want to keep the conversation going, say something new about the topic.
- ⇒ When they are finished with the conversation, let their partner(s) know.





Adults can engage children in conversations by making comments and asking questions. Children may not respond as quickly or as easily to comments as they do to questions. However, to become skilled conversational partners, children need to learn how to listen and respond to comments as well as questions.

Questions can be good conversation starters when they are sincere and acknowledge a child's interests. When Bryanna shows Ms. Anderson a large pinecone, Ms. Anderson asks, "Is that the biggest pinecone you ever saw?" Ms. Anderson avoids the following kinds of questions because they do not start conversations:

- ⇒ Questions that test what a child knows: "What kind of tree did that come from?"
- ⇒ Questions that are overly simple, concrete, or obvious and don't need to be answered: "What is that? That's a pinecone, isn't it?"

*(See the **Supporting Children in Conversations in Specific Settings** *handout for more information.*)*

In any group of young children, some will have more advanced language skills than their peers. These highly verbal children may dominate small-group conversations. They often have a lot to say and may interrupt other children or speak for them. These situations call for gentle but direct reminders about taking turns, listening while others speak, staying on the topic, and so on. Intervening in this way helps both the verbal child and the child who has difficulty getting into the conversation. Verbal children improve their conversation skills, while quieter children have more opportunities to express their ideas and feelings.

These types of gentle but direct reminders are also appropriate when supporting children with social/emotional delays.

It is especially important to be sensitive and responsive to the needs of second-language learners to ensure they have equal opportunities to participate in group conversations and feel comfortable doing so.



¹ "Connecting Home and School: A Conversation with Catherine Snow," Harvard Education Letter Research Online, July/Aug 1997.