

Top tips for talking: Ways in which practitioners can support and develop communication

Learning and Developing that provides stimulating activities

- Plan a variety of interesting activities so that there is plenty to talk about.
- Use daily routines to repeat and emphasise basic language.
- Listen to sounds around you and play games that encourage listening.
- Have fun together with songs and rhymes.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to

- Follow the child's lead
- Join in with the child's play or mirror their actions
- Focus on what a child is looking at or doing
- Wait and allow the child time to start the conversation
- Take turns to communicate so that adults and children both get a turn at talking.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication

- Build up a child's sentences by repeating what they say and adding words.
- Give choices to increase vocabulary, e.g. 'apple or satsuma?'
- If a child says something inaccurately, acknowledge what they have said and repeat it back in the correct way.
- Share the top tips with parents so that they can do the same at home.

Enabling Environments with available adults provide appropriate resources and opportunities for learning and development

- Get down to the child's level – it's easier to talk if you are face to face.
- Get a child's attention before you start to talk.
- Make sure you use lots of statements and fewer questions.
- Try to have a conversation with every child every day.

Background information

Some more information about why the top tips are important

Learning and Development that provides stimulating activities

EYFS guidance reminds us that all areas of Learning and Development are interconnected and equally important, and that all learning should be creative and play-based. Speech, language and communication development occurs at all times throughout the day and a rich curriculum providing a variety of experiences will ensure that children have the opportunity to hear and use all kinds of different vocabulary and language structures.

Example activity: Give one group of staff a picture of a pineapple. Give another group of staff a real pineapple and a knife. Ask each group to write down on a piece of paper the words they could use to describe the pineapple. Which group has the most words? Which group has the richest learning experience?

Daily routines and structure provide an opportunity for simple language to be repeated each day. This will be particularly helpful for children who are finding language learning more difficult or children who are learning English as an Additional Language. Think about the words that children usually learn first – phrases such as ‘all gone’ and ‘bye-bye’. These are words that they hear in the same ways every day. Hearing the same words and sentences repeated in the same context each day will provide a solid base of simple language structures that children can later build on.

An ability to listen to and discriminate sounds and an awareness of rhythm and rhyme are the basic building blocks for communication, speech, language and literacy development. There is more information about developing listening skills in the Letters and Sounds guidance (available here:

www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/local/clid/las.html). Talk to Your Baby also offers some good ideas and web links relating to using music with young children: (www.literacytrust.org.uk/talktoyourbaby/initiativesmusic.html). Singing time can also help children to develop attention and listening skills that are essential for communication.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication

Children learn step by step and it is the role of an adult to support the child to reach the next stage of development. By repeating what the child says and adding words, the adult is providing a scaffold for the child to reach the next step.

Example activity: Think about how an adult might help to build on a child's language skills in these situations: the child points to a bottle and says ‘muh’ (e.g. adult says: ‘milk’), child says ‘bus’ (e.g. adult says: ‘red bus’), child says: ‘daddy gone’ (e.g. adult says: ‘daddy’s gone shopping’), child says: ‘dolly want drink’ (e.g. adult says: ‘Is dolly thirsty? Would dolly like a drink of water?’).

Giving choices is another way of expanding a child's vocabulary and introducing new words.

Accompanying the words you use with gestures or signs can enhance understanding. Children use all their senses to learn, and supporting spoken words with visual clues makes learning easier, particularly if children find listening and attention difficult.

It is important to affirm and acknowledge all of a child's attempts to communicate. By repeating what a child says back to them in the correct way, adults are correcting the child without drawing unnecessary attention to their errors.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to

One of the first steps towards effective communication is the development of joint attention – the ability of a child to focus together with an adult on something of interest. Focusing together on a person, an action or an object provides the opportunity for 'sustained shared thinking' which has been identified as one of the key aspects of effective Early Years practice (www.surestart.gov.uk/research/keyresearch/epppe/). It also gives a strong signal to the child that you are interested in what they are doing and increases the likelihood of your language matching what the child is thinking about.

Example activity: *Ask one staff member to role-play the part of a child who is playing with a puzzle. Ask another staff member to role-play the part of an adult sitting with them who is attempting to show the child a book. Does the adult's language match with the child's experience? Is this interaction providing a good language learning environment for the child? Now repeat the role-play but change the adult's focus of attention so that they are following the child's lead and also playing and talking about the puzzle. What difference does this make?*

Research has shown that circumstances where adults restrict the child's opportunities to talk by dominating and directing conversation lead to children producing less complex language and can have a negative effect on their language development. It is therefore important to ensure that children are given time and space to start conversations and take turns with adults who do not rush in and dominate the talk.

Enabling Environments with available adults

Communication is not just about talking, we also use our facial expressions and body language to express our meaning. It's much easier to communicate if adults and children are face to face, particularly in a noisy environment such as an Early Years setting. This is also why it is important to get a child's attention before you talk to them, so that they can be mentally and visually engaged in the conversation.

Example activity: *Ask staff members to split into pairs. Ask one partner to stand up and one partner to remain sitting down. Now ask them to talk about how they got to work today. Repeat the exercise with both partners sitting on chairs, facing each other. How did each conversation feel? When was communication most effective?*

Good practice such as 'sustained shared thinking' and following a child's lead (as mentioned above) have been shown to occur most easily in one-to-one situations between adult and child or peer-to-peer (www.surestart.gov.uk/research/keyresearch/epppe/). It's difficult to ensure that all children get adequate one-to-one time unless this is built into the setting's daily routine and planning.

By commenting on a child's play using statements, adults are adding language to a child's experience and enhancing their vocabulary and language development. Questions can be useful ways to develop a child's thinking and understanding but it is important to be aware of the quality and quantity of questions. For example, asking lots of 'check' questions such as 'What's that?', 'What colour is this?' can put a child under unnecessary pressure and limits the child's opportunity to build on and develop their language skills.