

Building conversations

Communication and the intricacies of language are high on the political agenda, and while these can develop from sustained talking, it is important that we ensure the quality of these interactions is high.

CONVERSATIONS BETWEEN adults and children are at the heart of early language learning and as children become more confident and experienced, they learn from talking with each other. Yet it can be a real challenge for practitioners to get involved in the type of deep conversation, described as 'sustained shared thinking' (Siraj-Blatchford et al, 2002), that is an essential ingredient for language learning. This is, in part, due to the many children competing for adult attention, and the levels of support that children need in order to be able to talk with each other in shared activities.

For the past few years I have been working with practitioners across the UK, exploring how we can engage children in conversation in a way that is worthwhile, meaningful and satisfying for both children and adults.

In my view, it is not the length of the conversation that is important, but the feeling a child has that they are being 'focused on' for a short while, and that they are able to talk about what is important and meaningful to him. This can be a huge challenge, particularly when an adult's attention is being drawn away from the conversation – either by other children nearby, or by incidents in the room that need to be dealt with.

I have found that if, occasionally, two adults can plan to be together at an activity, this enables children and adults to become involved in conversation. I appreciate that this is a huge luxury, but if we believe that language development is of vital importance, then we need to do our best to plan for sessions where at least one adult is freed up for at least 45 minutes to be with an activity, and to have no other calls on his or her time.

I have been exploring in settings how we can use wooden blocks and a collection of natural materials, such as stones, twigs, pine cones, shells and wool, to help children create and tell stories (Jones, 2012). It has been particularly exciting to find that girls and boys play as equals once we move the wooden blocks away from the boy-dominated construction area, to a rug on the floor on the other side of the setting.

As they build with their blocks and wool and pine cones, children spontaneously make up stories that are many and varied – from domestic scenes, like going shopping with mummy, to adventures with princesses, bears, giants and porridge.

Stories with blocks on the floor

I left my crates of resources at Chapel Street Nursery School in Luton, and asked practitioners Sam Randall and Lisa Pepper to experiment with ways to extend this activity. I had first worked with Lisa and Sam as part of Luton's Every Child a Talker (ECaT) project and, together with colleagues, they continue to ensure that language development is at the forefront of all learning.

Many of the children are learning English as an additional language, and the setting is funded by the local authority to include children with significant learning needs. What follows is a recipe for a successful set of activities based on a fact-finding day I spent in the setting.

Our ingredients for the morning session were a set of Community Playthings wooden mini-unit blocks, including cylinders, cubes and cuboids; a bag of small coloured wooden blocks; bags containing pebbles, twigs, pine cones, wool; a rug to sit on; six children aged between two and four-years-old; two adults and plenty of time.

Sam and I agreed our roles before the session. I was going to be the 'manager', who sorted out the resources, organised the children and moved around, while Sam was going to stay in one spot and be available for conversation. We sat on rugs on the floor.

The children were familiar with the resources so they set about building little scenes and talking to each other, and with the adults, about what they were doing. Four-year-old Marcus used five red cubes to make a motorbike to go to Costco. He got stuck in a traffic jam – made with more blocks – and when he finally reached the shop he turned his motorbike into a trolley-full of shopping. This got converted into a car to take all the shopping home, which then got stuck in another traffic jam.

Two-year-old Adrian, meanwhile, took a natural-coloured block, coiled up a length of white wool on



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Girls and boys play as equals once we move the wooden blocks away from the boy-dominated construction area, to a rug on the floor across the setting

top, plonked a yellow cube in the middle and started to eat his 'egg on toast'.

Sam and Lisa report that these types of play responses are very typical, but only as long as an adult is able to stay with the group, and support the children with their ideas and to help them talk and play cooperatively with each other. When this happens, the children can become deeply absorbed in their play. I was in for a bit of a surprise though. I had assumed that introducing the coloured blocks would enhance the children's play by giving them more possibilities to be creative.

Sam and Lisa reported the opposite effect: 'A natural-coloured block can be anything. One minute it might be a car, and then it becomes a person, a tree or a bike. However a green block can't be a person, because people aren't green. The shapes of

the blocks are important too. A coloured-arch shaped block can be a bridge or an arch, whereas a cylinder or a rectangular block can be almost anything.'

Making marks, making a story

The morning session lasted an hour – the children only wanted to stop because it was lunchtime. In the afternoon we decided to take the session further, by moving off the floor and sitting around a table.

We covered the table with large sheets of white paper, and added large felt pens to our resources. I sat with Sam, and we were soon joined by an eager group of boys and girls. Sam and I had the same roles as 'manager' and 'conversation encourager'.

Covering the table with paper and introducing the felt pens took the children's play, story making and involvement to an even deeper level. Sam was freed



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'A natural-coloured block can be anything. One minute it might be a car, and then it becomes a person'

up to talk with Alicia and Eva about their ongoing story of Rapunzel in the castle, involving a wooden cylinder and a length of yellow wool, while I got involved with Antonio.

Antonio, the green felt pen, the pine cone and the piece of wool

Antonio built a house with his blocks. Nothing unusual there. Then I gave him a twig and he was off. 'That's a giant, and he's going to knock the house down. How can we stop him? I know I'll make a fence.' [Draws a big fence round the house]

'Oh no! He's in a helicopter,' [a rectangular block with a piece of wool hanging down as the 'ladder'] 'and he's going to come down the chimney! Look out! Here comes Mr Tumble in a police car.' [A pine cone on a rectangular block]

Antonio then drew three big balloons, one of which 'popped'. At that point I lost the thread, but I think the giant was going to fly away on one of the balloons, never to be seen again.

Sam and Lisa report that this type of fantasy play with natural materials is very popular in the setting. I was intrigued to hear about the depth of feeling that can be attached to a piece of wood. One little girl was playing with a cylinder, which was her 'princess'. Another child borrowed her cylinder to make a bus. The little girl protested, so was offered another cylinder to replace it. She was incensed: 'I don't want that! That's not my princess I've been playing with! That's a piece of wood!'

The role of the adult

Sam and Lisa are very clear that these types of activities can only succeed when an adult is able to remain at the table and support the children: 'Without the adult to support, the activity becomes a mess. The children can only really become deeply involved if the adult takes on the responsibility for managing the space. In that way the children are free to talk to each other about their stories, which is the whole point of the exercise.'

Often, when an adult has planned to spend a substantial amount of time at an activity, they see it as an opportunity for making notes. I try to discourage the adults from writing down observations. My view is that, if an adult is jotting down notes, they are not really available for deep conversation, and children are aware of this.

What I suggest is that when the children have finished making their stories, we can ask them if it is OK to take a photo of them and their story. The children can then decide what should be photographed before everything has to be tidied away. If we carefully remove the paper from the table, we often see mark making round the outside, and a blank space in the middle where the baskets of blocks and other materials were kept.

The next day the children can look at the photos and talk about the stories they had made. We stick

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their photos in the middle of the blank space on the paper, and make speech bubbles with the children's stories in them. These can be stuck with the photos, and makes a very effective display. If it is displayed at the children's eye level they will often talk about what they did.

The next time the children take part in this activity they can either carry on elaborating their original story, create a new one, or be inspired by someone else's idea.

Child-initiated, adult-led or adult-supported?

'In the early years, we are used to talking about child-initiated and adult-led play, but at Chapel Street we use staff for this type of adult-supported play, which we know will help the children to verbalise their ideas into a story, which they may not do if left alone,' comments Julia Miller, headteacher of Chapel Street Nursery School. 'As they get older and start to write stories, they should then have good ideas to use!'

It will be a management decision about how the adults are deployed, and there clearly has to be a benefit resulting from two adults being involved in a lengthy session. The benefits are language development, increased wellbeing and learning. Enough said!

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References

Jones M (2012) Building blocks to literacy; in *Early Years Educator* 14 (5) pp 35-37

Key points

- Conversations between adults and children are at the heart of early language learning and as children become more confident and experienced, they learn from talking with each other
- It can be a real challenge for practitioners to get involved in the type of deep conversation, described as 'Sustained Shared Thinking', due, in part, to the many children competing for adult attention, and the levels of support that children need in order to be able to talk with each other in shared activities
- It is not the length of the conversation that is important, but the feeling a child has that they are being 'focused on' for a short while, and that they are able to talk about what is important and meaningful to them
- If two adults can plan to be together at an activity, this enables children and adults to become involved in conversation
- This is a huge luxury, but if we believe that language development is of vital importance, then we need to do our best to plan for sessions where at least one adult is freed up for a minimum of 45 minutes to be with an activity, and to have no other calls on his or her time