



Up for discussion

*If young children are to develop into confident readers and writers, we must help them learn to share their ideas, says **Michael Jones**...*

READING KATHY BRODIE'S excellent articles on language development, recently (see *T: EY* 6.1 and 6.2, for example), reminded me of some exciting work that we developed as part of the Every Child a Talker (ECaT) project. Research shows that children with well-developed language are more likely to achieve well in school than those who start their primary education with poor language skills. Improving children's vocabulary is an important starting point. However, one of the key skills that children need in order to have a successful start in reading and writing, is the ability to talk about *ideas*.

Children particularly need to be able to talk about something that has already happened, and ideally to explain all about it to someone who wasn't there at the time. This ability to talk about something out of context helps children to understand and talk about events and ideas in stories, including what happened, what is going to happen and to explain how the people or animals in the story felt. Being able to use language in a decontextualized way is crucial when children come to write their own stories. This can seem like a very big challenge for practitioners working with children with delayed language or who are in the early stages of learning English as an additional language. However, even very young children can develop the ability to use language out of context, as I found when I talked with three-year-old Antonia about a worm she had found...

Antonia and the worm

Antonia was a very quiet little girl from a Spanish-speaking family, who had been in her preschool for six months. She had recently been diagnosed

with *otitis media* – otherwise known as 'glue ear' – which had affected her hearing. Antonia's speech and language therapist felt that this hearing impairment was the main reason for Antonia's delay in developing her home language and only being able to say a few words in English. Antonia tended to play alongside other children, and when I joined her in the digging area, she was digging in one corner, while two other children were busy nearby. As Antonia was digging she found a worm, which in Spanish is *gusano*. Our conversation went something like this:

Antonia: Look!

Michael: Ah yes! A worm.

Antonia: Gusano! (Screws up her face in disgust)

Michael: Gusano? Gusano?

Antonia: Gusano.

HELPING YOUNG CHILDREN TALK ABOUT IDEAS

- Share an experience together.
- Talk about what you are both doing.
- Help the child to talk to other children about what you are doing.
- Take the child to tell another adult.
- Talk to the child about what you might say to her parents at home time.
- Help the child describe to her parents what you had been doing together.
- The next day repeat the activity and talk about what you had done yesterday.

Michael: We say 'worm'. You have found a worm.

Antonia: Wom (looks disgusted).

Michael: Oh! You don't like the worm? Let's show the other children. (We go to show the two other children)

Michael: Look! Antonia has found something. What is it Antonia?

Antonia: Gusano.

Other children: It's a worm! She's got a worm!

Antonia: Wom! Wom!

With my help, Antonia had successfully talked about something with two other children. This was an achievement in itself, but now I wanted to see if I could help her talk to an adult about what we had done. I stayed with Antonia for another five minutes and then she wanted to play in the sand. I could see that another member of staff, Jackie, was there, so I said to Antonia, "Shall we tell Jackie about the worm?" As we walked over I said, "You found a worm. It was a wiggly worm. Let's tell Jackie about your worm."

When we arrived at the sandpit, I held Antonia's hand and both Jackie and I crouched down so that we were at her level.

Michael: Jackie, Antonia and I have been in the digging area.

Jackie: Have you? Was it nice? (Antonia says nothing)

Michael: Yes, it was. And Antonia found something, didn't you? (Antonia nods) Yes. We found something wiggly.

Jackie: Oh! Was it a worm? Antonia, was it a worm?

Antonia: Yes. Wom.

Jackie: Oh, you found a worm! Was it nice? Did you like it?

Antonia: (Screwing up her face) No!

Jackie: Oh! You didn't like it? You didn't



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Children need to be able to talk about something that has happened, and explain all about it to someone who wasn't there.

in our garden?

(Antonia smiles and nods her head.)

Jackie: And will you tell us all about it?

(Antonia smiles and nods her head.)

With this short series of conversations, Jackie and I had been able to boost Antonia's vocabulary, while at the same time helping her to share her experience with other children and adults who hadn't been there. Antonia's response in English may have only involved the word 'worm', but this was the start of a child with significant language delay being able to talk about events that had already taken place, and how she had felt about them. The next day Jackie followed this activity up by sharing with Antonia and the group a storybook about a worm and a non-fiction book about mini-beasts, which Antonia took home to talk about with her family.

This is a simple technique that can be applied to all children, to help them develop the skills they need to talk about something out of context. It is the beginning of their ability to share ideas.

like the worm?

Antonia: No!

Jackie: Shall we tell Mummy?

Antonia: Yes. Mama. Gusano.

Michael: Yes. Gusano. You can tell Mama you found a gusano, a worm.

Learning to share

Later in the session, the children were sitting in a group for story time. Jackie and I were leading the group, and we asked the children to tell us what they had been doing outside. As usual, the more confident children were able to explain what they had been doing. Jackie was keen to involve Antonia, so said, "Antonia was busy outside, weren't you, Antonia?" At the sound of her name, Antonia looked up. "Antonia was digging, and she found something wiggly." On hearing the word 'wiggly' several children called out "worm!" Jackie continued, "That's right. Antonia,

what did you find?" Jackie waited for five seconds and then said, "You found a..." To which Antonia said "Wom."

So Antonia had successfully talked in a group about something that only a few other people knew about. A short while later it was time for the children to be collected by their parents. Jackie made a point of talking to Antonia's mother.

Jackie (holding Antonia's hand): Mummy, Antonia has been busy today. She has been digging in the garden.

Mum: Oh! That's nice!

Jackie: Antonia, tell Mummy what you found when you were digging. What did you find?

Antonia: Gusano. Wom. Wom.

Jackie: That's right. You found a worm, didn't you?

(Antonia smiles and nods her head.)

Mum: In Spanish we say 'gusano' for worm. Shall we see if we can find some

Michael's latest book, *Talking and Learning with Young Children*, is published by Sage. To receive 25% off its purchase price, visit uk.sagepub.com and enter code UK16AUTHOR before 31/12/2016.

