

TALK, READ AND SING TOGETHER EVERY DAY!

TIPS FOR PRESCHOOL TEACHERS & OTHER EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAM PROVIDERS

A language rich environment is one in which children are surrounded by talking, singing, and reading and have many opportunities throughout their day, across all activities, to communicate with others and engage in back-and-forth conversations. A rich language environment is important to children's early learning, and can have strong effects on early language, vocabulary, reading, and math skills, as well as on children's social-emotional development.

Research shows that some young children are exposed to more language in their homes, early learning programs, and school settings, than other children. This difference in the number of words and back-and-forth conversations to which children are exposed is called the "word gap".

Below are some tips that you can use to help bridge the word gap by enriching the language environment of all young children in your care, including children who do not speak yet, children with disabilities or delays, and children who are learning more than one language. Partner with families and encourage them to try these strategies at home, in their home language. For children with disabilities or delays, communicate with their other service providers and keep each other informed about the strategies you are using to enhance their language environment.



ENGAGING CHILDREN IN CONVERSATIONS

Teachers and families play a critical role in developing language-rich learning environments. Try these strategies to engage all children in rich conversations in English or in their home language.

- Get down on the child's level.
- Tune in and listen to what the child says. If the child does not speak yet, tune into what they are doing or pointing to and use these moments to talk with them.
- Take turns talking. If the child doesn't have language yet, that may mean you are talking and the child is communicating in nonverbal ways, such as through gestures, looks, smiles, babbles, and word approximations (children's attempts at words).
- Talk about what the child is doing, what the child is looking at, or what the child is interested in.
- Ask questions that relate to the child's experiences or interests.
- Add words or questions to what the child says or does and model new language.
- Give the child enough time to respond. For children who do not have language yet, this may be a nonverbal response, like a gesture or a look.
- Stay tuned in to the child's facial and body expressions to make sure they are engaged.

FACILITATING “THICK” CONVERSATIONS

Children benefit from “thick” conversations. Thick conversations are characterized by giving children many chances to speak and communicate, asking open-ended questions, encouraging them to think and imagine, and having many back-and-forth exchanges. Here are four key strategies to engage children in thick conversations in English or in their home language:

1. ENCOURAGE BACK-AND-FORTH EXCHANGES.

- Tune into children’s interests and experiences and talk about them.
- Take turns communicating.
- Show that you are interested in what they are doing and listening to what they say.
- Provide time for children to respond.

3. INVITE CHILDREN TO TALK ABOUT WHAT THEY ARE DOING.

- Comment on what children are doing.
- Ask children questions about what they are doing, what they did before, and what they plan to do next.
- Encourage children to make comparisons and consider other possibilities.

2. EXTEND CHILDREN’S LANGUAGE.

- Expand on children’s words or their attempts at words by adding a little more. For example, if the child says “ball”, you can say “the blue ball is bouncing!”
- Add new vocabulary words to the ones children are already using when talking to them.
- Restate children’s language using correct grammar.

4. ENCOURAGE HIGHER-LEVEL THINKING.

- Help children make connections between what is happening in the classroom and what is happening in their home or community.
- Explain your thinking process.
- Introduce new concepts or ideas.

HERE’S ONE WAY TO TURN A THIN CONVERSATION...

Adult: Do you want to play with the boat?

Child: Yes.

Adult: What color is it?

Child: Blue.

Adult: Who will ride in the boat?

Child: The man.



→ INTO A THICK CONVERSATION.

Adult: Which toy do you like to play with the most?

Child: The boat.

Adult: Oh, the boat is your favorite. What will you do with the boat?

Child: The man is going to ride on it.

Adult: Where is the man traveling?

Child: Into the bubbles.

Adult: The bubbles are dense. Watch out!

Child: Help! The man is falling out!

Adult: Oh no! Who will rescue the man?

Child: I’ll get the whale!

Adult: The whale is the hero!

ASKING QUESTIONS

Asking stimulating and developmentally appropriate questions can help boost the language environment. Below are four strategies for extending conversations with questions.

ASK CHILDREN ABOUT WHAT THEY ARE DOING.

- What are you working on today?
- You are working very hard, tell me about your project.
- What are your plans for those materials?

ASK CHILDREN TO MAKE PREDICTIONS.

- What do you think will happen next?
- What else could we use this container for?
- What would you do if that were you?

ASK CHILDREN TO PROVIDE EXPLANATIONS.

- Why do you think that happened?
- How can I help you solve this problem?
- How did you do that?

ASK CHILDREN TO CONNECT LEARNING TO THEIR OWN LIVES.

- What does this remind you of?
- These blocks are blue – what blue objects do you have in your home?
- The boy in the story loved his pet hamster. Do you have any pets? Tell me about them.

For children with limited language, giving them a choice can help them respond more easily to questions.

For example, “did you use crayons or markers to draw that picture?”

Keep high expectations for all children and gradually increase the complexity of your questions as children progress in their development.

EXPAND ON CHILDREN’S WORDS

Expanding on children’s language, nonverbally, in English or in their home language, is a meaningful way to extend conversations with children. Here are some key ways you can extend a conversation by expanding on what children say or communicate.

EXPAND ON CHILDREN’S WORDS TO SCAFFOLD LANGUAGE AND GIVE THEM MORE INFORMATION.

- Expand phrases so they are complete.
- Make phrases more complex.
- Add novel and interesting words.
- Summarize their thoughts.
- Relate to their lives and prior knowledge or experiences.
- Explain your thinking.
- Connect new and familiar concepts.

REPEAT WHAT THE CHILD SAYS, AND ADD A LITTLE MORE. YOU CAN ADD WORDS THAT:

Describe:

Child: I saw Ana’s dog.

Adult: Oh, you saw Ana’s fluffy little dog?

Name:

Child: I like that.

Adult: I like that red shiny whistle too!

Provide more information:

Child: Yay! David is coming!

Adult: Yes, I heard your Uncle David is going to visit in August and you’ll go to the beach!

USING NOVEL AND INTERESTING WORDS

One way to extend conversations with children is by incorporating novel words into everyday talk. Novel words are new and rich vocabulary words that build children's language. For example, you can use the word "enormous" instead of "big". Children can learn big, new, and interesting words through repeated exposures and concrete explorations of what they mean. Teachers and families can use novel words with children in English or in their home language. Incorporating novel words takes planning. Here are some strategies to get you started:

- Identify novel words by brainstorming with colleagues, searching children's books, poems, and songs, and using a thesaurus to find alternative ways to say the same word.
- Select materials that expand children's vocabulary, such as toy vehicle sets (e.g. ambulance, helicopter), people figurines (e.g. astronauts, pediatricians), and everyday materials in dramatic play (e.g. colander, stethoscope).
- Create child-friendly definitions for novel words in advance. Make sure they are simple, focus on qualities or characteristics, and are made up of familiar words.
- Take time to clearly explain what novel words mean and how they are used.
- Make novel words "real" and interesting using photos, objects, and activities. This is especially important for children with disabilities or developmental delays.
- Model using novel words and provide frequent opportunities for children to practice using them
- Use novel words in spontaneous conversations.
- Use novel words and other rich vocabulary words in responses to children.
- Keep track of the words a child knows and add novel words that build on familiar concepts.
- Read books and sing songs that contain novel words. Talk about what they mean.
- Expose children to novel words and have conversations with children during any activity during the day like meal time, transitions, circle time, story time, and dramatic play.
- Let families know about new words children are learning and encourage them to use novel words in their home language.
- If you have children who receive speech therapy or related services, share these words with the therapist who can support their use as well.



USE THE WORD
"ENORMOUS"
INSTEAD OF "BIG"

INTERACTIVE AND DIALOGIC READING

Dialogic reading is an interactive way of talking with young children about a book. The goal of this strategy is to engage a child in a dialogue and keep it going so the child has the opportunity to learn new concepts and words, practice using words, and form longer phrases and sentences. It can help with vocabulary and language development for all children and especially for those children learning to speak more than one language. For children learning more than one language, it is important that you read to them often, in their home language and in English.

An easy way to remember basic dialogic strategies is to “**Follow the CAR.**” **Follow the CAR** stands for:

- **F**ollow the child’s lead
- **C**omment and Wait
- **A**sk questions and Wait
- **R**espond by adding a little more and Wait

STEPS IN DIALOGIC READING:

1. Show the book and ask children to make predictions about the story.
2. Point out key words or ideas to help get the children ready for the story.
3. Read the book from beginning to end and use as much expression and gesture as you can.
4. Ask children to play an active part by making predictions along the way, answering questions, and pointing to or making comments about pictures, letters, and words.
5. The next time you read the book, and each time after that, let the children tell more and more of the story. Notice new words, interesting ideas, and silly actions and talk about them.
6. Ask “thinking questions”. One easy way to remember how to ask thinking questions is called CROWD. That stands for:
 - Completion questions (ask children to fill in the blank)
 - Recall questions (ask children if they remember something about the story)
 - Open-ended questions (encourage more than one word answers)
 - WH- questions (ask children who, what, where, when, how and why)
 - Distancing questions (ask children to make connections between the story and their own personal experiences)



STRATEGIES FOR CHILDREN LEARNING MORE THAN ONE LANGUAGE

Many children enter early learning settings learning more than one language. The tips in this document are appropriate for all children, but below are a few tips specific to enriching the language environment of young dual or multi-language learners.

Use multimedia and concrete objects to create connections between both languages. For example, show a toy seahorse or a picture of one if you're talking about a seahorse.

Use gestures and body language when communicating in the less familiar language. Children learn from facial expressions.

Speak slowly and clearly. Children need time to hear and process the meaning and context of what is being said.

Anticipate new words and give clear meanings. Use a lot of context, building on objects in the environment, routines, and what the children are experiencing at the moment.

Support interactive play with peers. Children gain a lot of their language through interaction with their peers. Praise children's responses so that you motivate children to continue learning their new language.

Encourage adults who speak children's native language, including families, to volunteer in the classroom and interact with children in their home language throughout the day.

You can find more tips like these—as well as videos, information, and more—on Too Small to Fail's website, www.talkingisteaching.org.

Track your child's development using the [Milestones Moments Booklet](#). If you have concerns about a child's development, including their language development, talk to the child's family about it. Ask them if they have concerns and if they observe the same issues at home. With their permission, conduct a developmental and behavioral screening and encourage them to talk to their primary care provider. For more information on developmental and behavioral screening, visit [Birth to Five: Watch Me Thrive!](#)

For more information on early learning, please visit [Head Start's National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning](#) and the [Early Head Start National Resource Center](#). For more information on working with young children who are learning more than one language, please visit [Head Start's National Center for Cultural and Linguistic Responsiveness](#).

For more information on enhancing the language environment for children with developmental disabilities or delays, please visit the [Center for Early Literacy Learning](#).

