Supporting Conversations in the Classroom
Why is language development so important?

- Language abilities are related to the development of social skills, emotion and behavior regulation, and relationships with peers $^{1,2,3,4}$

- Early language skills play an important role in the development of future literacy abilities in childhood and beyond $^{5,6,7}$

- Children with delayed language development in preschool have persistently lower reading skills in elementary school $^{8,9}$
Key Strategies

1. Set the stage for conversation
2. Use intentional responsiveness strategies
3. Elicit language with scaffolding and open-ended questions

Goal: Using these strategies together can help us have longer back-and-forth exchanges with children that:

- Encourage them to continue talking to peers and teachers
- Teaches them new words and skills,
- Provides opportunities for them to practice those new skills!
Setting the Stage for Conversations

- Be an engaging conversational partner
- Maximize active child engagement
- Select materials that spark conversation
Setting the stage for conversations: Be an engaging partner

- Sit and talk at the child’s eye level
- Match the child’s affect
- Show the child you are interested: play with the child, don’t just narrate
- Imitate the child’s play first, then expand and suggest something new if play gets repetitive
- Respond to everything the child communicates (words, vocalizations, gestures)
- Take turns: one adult utterance or question for every child statement
Why focus on taking balanced turns?

- It allows the child more opportunities to communicate.
  - More opportunities = more practice = growth in communication skills.
- It teaches the child how to have a conversation
  - Child communicates
  - Adult communicates and WAITS, which signals to the child that it is his or her turn to communicate
Setting the stage for conversation: Maximize Engagement

- Review classroom rules before activities start to minimize teacher time spent on redirecting off-task or challenging behavior.
- Post visual reminders of rules and expectations in individual centers that can be used by classroom staff to quickly re-engage children.
- Demonstrate and teach how to appropriately play with new materials or activities when they are introduced.
- Brainstorm with children how they could play with new materials at centers ahead of time.
Setting the stage for conversation: Selecting Materials

- Identify alternate or additional materials that may support child engagement based on skill level and interests/preferences
- Have “back up” materials to support engagement for individual children or to extend an activity or interactions
- Consider how to adapt or change materials to extend interest in activities over the course of a few days or a week
- Include related materials across multiple centers to increase the opportunities to make conceptual connections across the day
Material Selection: Example
How to respond to child initiations?

1. Repeat and Recast
2. Extend and Expand
3. Make Connections
Repeat and Recast

- Instead of saying “yes” or “you’re right!”, try repeating what the child says to reinforce and affirm their statement.
- Repeating tells the child you heard them and you are interested in what they are saying.
- Recast if the child’s language was:
  - Grammatically incorrect
  - Hard to understand
  - Non-specific
- **Recast**: Repeat what the child said correct grammar/sounds/vocabulary.
- Recasting allows you to give child feedback without disrupting the natural conversation.
## Recast Examples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If a child says....</th>
<th>You can say....</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“He goed to the store!”</td>
<td>“He <strong>went</strong> to the store!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I like sketti”</td>
<td>“I like <strong>spaghetti</strong> too!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“It’s on the cooker”</td>
<td>“The <strong>frying pan</strong> is on the <strong>stove</strong>”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
- When the child communicates, imitate their communication and add target words
  - Target words: Specific nouns, verbs, and descriptors
  - Avoid only adding:
    - Praise words (yes, right, good job, wow)
    - Sound effects
    - Non-specific words (it, this, that, there)
- Expansions immediately connect the child’s communication to additional new language
- Expansions help children learn new vocabulary and talk in more complex sentences
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>If a child says....</th>
<th>You can say....</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“They’re eating a lot”</td>
<td>“The kids are eating a lot because they are so hungry!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We put blocks on”</td>
<td>“We are putting blocks on top of our structure”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>{points} “Ball!”</td>
<td>{Points}: “The ball is rolling!”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Choo-choo”</td>
<td>“Choo-choo, here comes the train”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“We’re going to the grocery store”</td>
<td>“We’re going to the grocery store to get the ingredients”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Make connections

- Use child initiations to spark conversations about concepts across activities
- Reference past activities or experiences
- Making connections gives the child multiple opportunities and examples to engage in learning about a concept with different materials.

Examples:

Child: “I’m using the tools to build in blocks”
Teacher: “I wonder if the tools you are using are the same or different from the ones we saw on our field trip to the construction site”

Child: “I’m painting a garden and the sun”
Teacher: “Wow, the sun reminds me of when we read a book about what plants need to grow”
What if a child isn’t saying anything?

- Mirror and map
- Open ended questions
- Conversation starters
- Scaffolding and support
Mirror and Map

- **Mirroring**: adult imitates the child’s nonverbal behaviors
- **Mapping**: adult “maps” language onto these actions, by describing these actions

First imitate the action and then label the action with words

**Examples:**

Child: \{pushes car down a ramp\}
Teacher: \{pushes car down a ramp\} “The racecar is going down the ramp!”

Child: \{stirs pretend food\}
Teacher: \{stirs\} “Stir up our ingredients”
Why use mirroring and mapping?

• Mirroring allows the adult to join in the interaction with the child

• Mapping provides the child with a language rich description of the activity

• Mirroring and mapping allows the adult to have balanced turns when the child is not communicating--low pressure way to start a conversation with a child who may not respond to questions

• What the adult says is more meaningful since the adult and child are doing the same action and language is “mapped” right on top of what the child is doing
Questions

- Avoid yes/no questions
- Use open ended questions more than closed ended (questions that only require a one word answer) to keep conversations going.
Examples of open ended questions:

○ *Generating a prediction* (What do you think will happen if we add more water to the mix?)

○ *Explaining thought process* (How did you know that the ball would go down the ramp?)

○ *Comparing and categorizing* (How are those insects different from the spiders we learned about last week?)

○ *Problem solving* (What could we use to make sure our block structure doesn’t fall down?)

○ *Making connections* (What types of food do you cook at home?)
What if the child doesn’t answer?

- Make sure you have given enough wait time
- Try to avoid giving an answer or moving to a yes/no question right away
- Use at least one follow up support
- Examples of support:
  - Make a connection to something familiar
  - Offer a hands on experience
  - Offer a choice
● I wonder...
● I noticed that...
● That reminds me of...
● I’m curious about...
● That is similar to...
● That is really different from...
● That makes me feel...
● That makes me think about...
Ideal Conditions for Learning Language:

- A responsive partner
- Joins child in his activities and play
- Models words and phrases that match the child’s meaning
- Expands what the child communicates with new words
- Asks questions to gain new information from the child
Other Resources

http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/ (Center on the Social Emotional Foundations for Early Learners)

http://www.earlyliteracylearning.org/index.php (Center for Early Literacy Learning)

http://www.readingrockets.org/article/dialogic-reading-effective-way-read-preschoolers (Strategies for promoting learning during storybook read-alouds)
References


