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Tuning into Talk: what matters most in supporting early language  
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Pedagogy & Curriculum

...a young child's concern is to be an active busy learner, trying to make sense of the world around them...they are learning all of the time from all of their experiences. In essence this is their curriculum. However...the curriculum is also about what the practitioner wants children to learn within a caring, nurturing environment – the intentional promotion of experiences and interactions which are important for young children to learn.  
(Building the Ambition p51)

‘The limits of my language mean the limits of my world’  
Ludwig Wittgenstein

Purposes of talk
- Communicate wants or needs  
- Join play  
- Plan, develop or maintain play  
- Resolve or avoid conflict  
- Entertain, tell an event or story  
- Find out, wonder, hypothesise

Vygotsky:
- Interrelationship between thought and the most universal of cultural tools – language  
- Thought is internalised language, growing out of private speech  
- The structures of language determine the structures of thinking

Starting from the very beginning

The Social Baby – Understanding Babies’ Communication from Birth  
www.socialbaby.com
Key predictors of learning delay have been identified as:

- Poverty – which affects certain ethnic groups disproportionately
- Health issues such as illness and disability
- Mother’s educational background
- Low parental aspirations and lack of interest in education
- Parents with limited English or literacy
- Family instability
- Poor early care and socialisation
- Poor attachment
- Controlling, critical and harsh parenting.

Studies of teacher – child conversations in pre-schools and schools

**Most adult talk is:**

- Providing children with assistance in obtaining items
- Managing behaviour
- Supporting children in peer relationships
- Praising children for appropriate behaviour
- Providing instructions to children
- In book reading -- organisation of the reading task, simple feedback and naming activities

Language Matters

- Making friends,
- Sustaining relationships,
- Emotional regulation,
- Problem solving,
- Behavioural control

are dependent on good speech and language skills.

"In the absence of the regulatory partner, a baby can do very little to regulate himself or herself other than to cry louder or to withdraw mentally."


Caregiver

- Responds predictably and consistently to meet baby’s needs eg recognises baby’s hungry cry, comforts and feeds as quickly as possible, smiles and talks gently making eye contact

Baby

- Soon calms and enjoys feeding
- Distress soon forgotten.
- Attention focused on exploring, allowing brain to develop.

Caregiver

- Unpredictable and inconsistent and usually does not meet needs eg does not attend to baby’s cries, leaves to cry, does not have bottles ready, does not smile or talk

Baby

- Remains distressed with energy focused on need for food
- More difficulty interacting with people and objects due to high stress
- Brain shuts out stimulation needed for learning and development

"Sensitive periods' in early brain development

- High
- Low

[Diagram: Sensitivity]

P.O. Svanberg Sept 2010
“With only other people’s speech to guide her, she’s fulfilled the extraordinary potential of her human brain”
Robert Winston: Baby It’s You

Quality provision makes a difference

Findings
Overall, no positive benefits on social or cognitive outcomes nor on parent-child relationships
But -- look at setting quality
• 4/5 less than ‘good’ (ITERS < 5)
In high quality settings
• children increased vocabulary from 34th to 46th percentile
• parent-child relationships improved

What is quality?
“Quality is not a ceiling that is reached, or a line that is crossed, but it is a continuous and ongoing journey of improvement against outcomes for children.”

Sustained shared thinking

Best developmental outcomes in those where there were frequent communicative interactions that showed ‘sustained shared thinking’:
• ‘working together in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept or evaluate activities. It requires all participants to contribute to the thinking and that the thinking must be extended’
  This was found in only 15% of settings

Investigating the Role of Language in Children’s Early Educational Outcomes
At age 2:
• Language development predicts children’s performance on entry to primary school.
• Understanding and use of vocabulary and use of two- or three-word sentences is very strongly associated with performance on entering primary school.
• The communication environment is a more dominant predictor of early language than socio-economic background.

Better Communication Research Programme
Three dimensions are important and can usefully be assessed:
• language learning environment
• language learning opportunities
• language learning interactions

http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/cedar/better/
An important implication of the present study is the need for all school staff to fully understand, appreciate and achieve quality use of these language learning interaction techniques.

Conversations between adults and children that are characterised by high quality language learning interactions are the core of the communication supporting classroom.

A classroom may have an exemplary physical environment and a deliberate provision of daily language activities; however, without adult-child interactions of sufficiently high quality and sensitivity, these efforts are not likely to result in the desired child outcomes.

Talking – and listening – with young children in ways which encourage language development

- Responding sensitively to children’s communication
- Observing and commenting on child’s current interest, following the child’s lead
- Talking to children in language they are likely to understand
- Taking time for children to respond

Goldilocks

1 There are in all 51 turns. The practitioner has 25 and the children all together have 26 (although 6 of these are non-verbal turns).
2 The practitioner says 330 words and the children all together say 62.
3 The practitioner asks 30 questions. The children ask none.

The practitioner speaks to all the children and each child says something to her. However, not one of the children says anything to another child.

· Story is a language development activity, but I did all the talking. The children hardly said anything. I seem to have forgotten that getting the children to talk should be my priority.
· I controlled everything the children said, leaving them to give mostly one-word answers.
· I seem to have created conditions so that children did not think they had a right to say anything of their own or to talk to each other.

'I have learned quite a lot about language now, so when I look back at this extract, I think what I did was so limited. It makes me feel very uncomfortable. But what it does do is show me how much I have changed now.
‘I asked only closed questions to which I already knew the answer. Not once did I invite the children to say what they thought or felt about the story.

I learned nothing about the children’s thinking or their language knowledge, largely because there was nothing for me to hear. I had not allowed their voices to be heard.’

Early Years practitioner

Goldilocks revisited

My first move was to try to find something else to do after a storytelling rather than ask questions about the plot. I decided to ask questions or, even better, raise points about issues in the story. This invited the children to offer a more personal response and their comments would be new to me.

Instead of: “What happened next?”
I tried: “Was Goldilocks foolish to go into a strange cottage on her own?”

Instead of asking a question, I tried, “I’d be really annoyed if I came home and found someone had eaten all my food.”
Then I waited for them to comment.

My second move was to make myself shut up and wait for the children to talk.

After I asked the question, or raised the issue, I learnt to sit there and wait. I felt very uncomfortable and worried that the children would simply sit there.

At first they were slow to come in; they were so used to me taking over. But as we did several sessions like this so the children got used to the freedom to talk.

My third move was to persuade the children that silence was OK. I introduced the idea that silence was thinking time. I was not sure that this would work, but it did. The children adopted it quite easily. Now they were under no pressure from me to talk. They only talked if they had something to say.

I was now listening to the children’s independent voices.

I had a much better understanding of what my children could really do with their language.

Because I was saying less and because the children felt free to contribute their own thoughts, they started to talk to each other.

Early Years practitioner
After: children telling their own stories

'It was very hard to change. I had not been conscious of how I had been managing the children's talk and it is very difficult to change an unconscious habit.

It took some time and it took help from colleagues, but it has been well worth it. The improvement in the children's use of language has been dramatic.'

Early Years practitioner

Where and when do rich conversations take place in your setting?

What can you find out about
- Hot spots?
- Cold spots?

5-finger rule

Questions and Comments

What's that?

What colour is it?

What noise does it make?

Ooops... (apologise)

I can see... (describe)

I think... (share ideas)

So you think that... (clarify)

I wonder... (express curiosity)

Let's think what to try... (suggest alternative)

He might... (speculate)

I'd really like to know about this... (be a learner)

Monitoring the quality of practitioner interaction 1

Sensitive communication partner

Did the adult...

- Use children’s names to draw attention?
- Be on the same level as the child, and make eye contact?
- Use natural gestures and symbols to reinforce language?
- Talk slowly enough for the child to understand?
- Give the child enough time to talk, with silences to allow the child to respond or pauses to indicate turn-taking?
- Respond to the child, confirming they have been understood? (with a look, gesture, word or repeating what the child said)
- Let the child choose the activity, and follow what the child wanted to do with the toys?
- Wait for the child to start interacting? (the child looks at the adult, gestures, makes a sound or uses a word)
Monitoring the quality of practitioner interaction 2

Supportive communication partner
Did the adult...
Comment on what the child is doing – with words or short phrases?
Limit the number of questions (avoid closed questions)
Use comments or open-ended questions?
Provide words by labelling objects, actions, and abstract things like feelings?
Use language appropriate to the child's level of understanding?
Cue the child to take a turn, encouraging turn-taking with peers and adults?
Model language in correct forms in response to children's errors, without directly correcting the child?

Monitoring the quality of practitioner interaction 3

Stimulating communication partner
Did the adult...
Expand on what the child says by repeating what the child says and adding a bit more information or more words?
Model language that the child is not yet using?
Introduce and repeat new words in a range of contexts, and encourage the child to use new words in their own talking?
Play with language, highlighting differences between words and phrases
Talk through specific situations, providing a 'script' which describes routines and what to say and do?

‘Attention, the act of listening with palpable respect and fascination, is the key to a Thinking Environment. The quality of your attention determines the quality of other people's thinking.’
Nancy Kline (1999:37)