



AN EXTENDED TURN TO TALK

When we talk with young children, we may notice the briefness of their responses. For example they might merely reply “It was OK.” when we enquire about their day at school. At times it seems that children anticipate that only a sentence or even a single word will be expected. However some people might argue that at times it is hard to stop a child from talking. Thankfully this can also be true. Many children do feel comfortable and enjoy talking with others but these occasions are often with friends and during play, rather than in response to adult interaction at school or home.

Many adults are not sure how to stimulate sustained conversation with children.

What is extended “turn to talk”?

Extended “turn to talk” is an important aspect of language which involves the child learning to contribute a number of connected sentences on a topic or in conversation. Extended discourse requires us to use our language differently and in a more mature way than in short sentence-by-sentence or question and answer exchanges. It involves planning what we are going to say, both before we begin and as we go along. Sentences need to be linked together as our thoughts go across the boundaries of the sentences.

If we refer to “Mr. and Mrs. Brown who live next door” in one sentence, we may refer to them again in the following sentence using the words “they” or “them”. We need to link our sentences logically, giving background information for the listener if required and explaining things in order. The passage of time is signaled with words such as, “the very next day”, “after lunch”, or “on Wednesday”. Explanation is often part of the organization of an extended turn to talk and so the language will reflect this with the appearance of words such as “because”, “so”.

Why is it important that children are given opportunities for a longer turn to talk?

Research suggests that this more sophisticated type of language is linked to school success. As children progress through the grades they must learn to use extended discourse in telling stories, giving explanations, reporting, expressing an opinion or writing an essay. It makes sense to build confidence with extended discourse gradually, beginning with simple oral tasks.

- A longer turn to talk provides opportunities to express your own thoughts and opinions on a topic and also to express how you feel. Our vocabulary choices will reflect this with use of ‘thinking’ words such as “believe”, “think” and “decide” and ‘feeling’ words such as “upset”, “angry”, “excited”.
- Many written language tasks at school require the production of a continuous and planned passage, such as a story. We must prepare children for these tasks by providing opportunities for them to have an extended turn to use their developing spoken language skills.
- Positive communication experiences at home will help children feel accepted and valued. Growth in spoken language skills will build children’s self-confidence and help them learn to negotiate social interactions at school. This often transfers to other aspects of their learning and life.

The key ingredients for extended discourse are a time, a place, a willing talking partner and an engaging topic or activity.

What opportunities can we make for extended discourse?

- In the early years children find it easier to engage in prolonged dialogue when they are playing with objects. Much discussion involves the ‘here and now’ – discussion that is centred on things and people present. The vocabulary may be non-specific and there may be unfinished sentences as thoughts move from one event to the next in these early exchanges. Later, children begin to rely less on the support of things in the immediate environment and can talk about things and events in the past that the current listener has not shared. This transition to the more ‘literate’ style of language is a gradual one. More information can be found on our website in Newsletter No. 11 – Stepping into Literate Language.

- It is important that children experience a variety of settings, activities and also listening partners. Topics or play activities need to be of interest to the children and appropriate to their developmental needs. Open-ended topics and materials in which there is not a specifically right or wrong way of doing things or answering, help children participate in a relaxed way.

In the words of Burns, Griffin, and Snow (1999) "for young children whose developing minds are striving to become literate, talk is essential--the more meaningful and substantive, the better". In addition they say, "talking to adults is children's best source of exposure to new vocabulary and ideas" (p. 19).

Activities for home or school may include:

- explaining the rules of a game.
- retelling a story, perhaps with some aspect changed, e.g. the ending or the problem.
- making up a story with or without the use of puppets or other props.
- explaining your preferences about a book, TV program or the menu for dinner.
- choosing a topic card and giving your opinion as in the ‘Love and Reilly’ resources - ‘Spot on Speaking’ and ‘Chatterbox’.
- giving a verbal review of a book that you have read or shared or a film that you have seen.
- acting out a play or story.
- playing some of the many commercially available talking games such as ‘Outburst’.
- re-telling a funny incident or telling a joke with a ‘punch line’.

How can we encourage children?

Setting the scene: You will need to create a relaxed atmosphere in which children find that talking is interesting and rewarding. It is often helpful to have something to handle or look at as the stimulus for discussion, rather than expecting conversation to ‘just happen’.

Finding the time can be difficult for some families. Make a special effort to share family dinner times without the TV on so that there is an opportunity for discussion.

Perhaps each member of the family can take a turn to tell about something good, interesting or surprising that happened that day.

Younger family members may need some gentle support to keep their turn. First we must start with a belief that all children can contribute. We show that we value that contribution by allowing ‘wait time’ as they plan, rephrase or think of more to say. So beware of letting yourself or others jump in too early.

Managing the length of turn.

At the start of a discussion session, talk with the children about how speaking and listening are closely connected. If we really listen to what others say we not only learn what they think but also formulate our own ideas more clearly. Encourage the children to visualize or create a picture in their mind as the other person speaks. This helps us to “keep track” of what is being said and gives a framework for adding our own thoughts and experiences. If one child is having a long ‘talking turn’ it is often difficult to maintain the interest and attention of others who are listening. As adults we will need to model sincere and interested listening and involve others when appropriate. We can make a comment or ask a question, such as “Has that ever happened to you like that Sam?” To avoid cutting the turn of the original speaker, you can then redirect attention, for example “Now let’s hear the rest of what Liam was telling us.”

On many occasions it will be up to the adult to orchestrate the distribution, frequency and length of a child’s turn within a group. Quieter children will appreciate being asked if they have anything to ask or say, even if they do not then offer much. If you have had previous dialogue you can mention this as a way of involving a reluctant child. For example, by saying “Asha told me yesterday that her dog Skeeta had to go to the vet.” “Could you tell the others how Skeeta is getting along now Asha?” Do not forget to wait a little longer than usual for a child to add to what he or she has said or to process your question.

Praise children’s efforts in talking sessions – both as a speaker and a listener.

Summary

Children who have opportunities for an extended turn to talk and listen will become more self-assured and competent participators in groups. They will also gain important experience and practice with different types of talking such as storytelling, recounting and reporting. Confidence with this kind of language use will provide a solid foundation for written literacy.

Resources & References

Burns, M.S, Griffin, P., & Snow, C.E. (Eds.). (1999). Starting out right: A guide to promoting children's reading success. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.
Available online: <http://www.nap.edu/html/sor/>

Spot on Speaking Love and Reilly 2009

Chatterbox Love and Reilly 2003

Use the following as a handout or poster...

KEEP THE CONVERSATION GOING.



Go through and tick the box if YOU practise these great conversation- extenders.

Comments are great to use in conversation, rather than always asking questions.

Open-ended questions encourage a child to think and learn more than questions requiring a 'yes/no' answer. Open-ended questions often start with WHAT, WHO, WHEN, WHERE, WHY, HOW.

Novel objects and pictures, as well as props, amuse young children and prompt them to comment and ask questions.

Very important - your own body language! Children have the knack of knowing whether or not you are really interested in what they have to say.

Even exchange. Be aware of how much you are talking and how much the *child* is talking. Aim to let each conversation partner have a fair turn in the exchange.

React with interest and encouragement rather than judgment or correction.

Share this special time without digital distractions. Your child will love the attention!

Add on to what your child says. This way, they know you are listening in what they have said.

Try to wait a little longer than you usually would after you ask a question or make a comment.

This 'wait time' allows a child to formulate more complex language and often results in longer sentences.

Interests - follow your child's interests and there will be a greater chance of extended talk time!

Opportunities to retell a story or a described event to another person like a grandparent or neighbour, will help children to refine their language skills.

Never underestimate the value of the time you take to converse with young children.