

## How to develop, extend and sustain conversations that support children's language and thinking



### GET INVOLVED

1. **Be interested and be genuine** – have real conversations with children about things both they and you are interested in.
2. **Use humour and have fun** - use non-verbal and verbal humour to connect with children and share enjoyment in learning activities. Model excitement and wonder.

### MODEL CONVERSATION CONVENTIONS

1. **Model listening and responding** – model being a responsive conversation partner
2. **Use verbal and non-verbal cues** – use verbal cues (um hmm, ok....) as well as facial expression and body language to show your interest and cue children to take their turn.

### DEVELOP, EXTEND AND SUSTAIN CONVERSATION AND THOUGHT

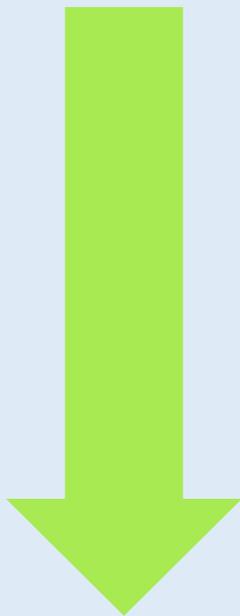
1. **Comment** – use comments to get a conversation started and to cue another turn by giving the child interesting information that they'll want to respond to. Often a comment can be more powerful than a question in encouraging conversation. Develop comments into a running commentary.
2. **Inform and explain**- give information about past or present, relate present experience to past experience, provide details and new vocabulary or compare/ contrast two things. Give reasons for what is happening, explain outcomes or justify opinions or preferences
3. **Pretend and project** - talk about imaginary things, play a pretend role or create an imaginary story. Project into other people's or animal's lives, experiences and feelings to help children think about others and understand that their experiences, lives, needs and points of view are different than their own. Project into experiences never experienced.
4. **Talk about feelings and opinions** - sadness, anger, fear, frustration, excitement, happiness, friendliness or delight. Talk about opinions and impressions.
5. **Talk about thinking** - model thinking, comment on children's persistence, concentration and effort, recap and clarify ideas or offer an alternative viewpoint. Model and encourage children to analyse and evaluate, ask them to identify motives or causes, share their opinions and explain their thinking
6. **Talk about the past and the future** - talk about events in the past or which have not happened yet. Predict what will happen or speculate about what might or could happen. Anticipate possible problems and possible solutions, put potential problems into words and plan ahead to avoid them, or consider alternative ways of handling a situation.
7. **Tell and retell** – model and encourage recounting and retelling, both real life events and stories. Children need opportunities to practice their expressive language skills so that they learn to include the details. Attention to detail increases the length of sentences, the size of vocabulary and the grammatical complexity of the talk, and also enlarge children's store of background knowledge. Encourage children to tell and retell the stories of their own lives and fictional stories.
8. **Use questions and prompts** – you can continue conversations with questions if you match your questions to the child's stage of communication and ask genuine questions that build on their interests. But questions that test a child's knowledge, or are instructions in disguise, can stop a conversation dead in its tracks! Often a prompt can be as effective as a direct question. Examples include:
  - **completion prompts** – you allow the child to finish your sentence
  - **recall questions or prompts** e.g. what did we see when we visited the farm?
  - **open questions or prompts** – these have no 'right' answer and often begin with 'why' or 'how' (e.g. how do you think she felt? What else could Fred have done?) Sometimes a prompt can be more natural than a question, for example speculating or wondering with a child (Mmm, I wonder what is going on here....)
  - **'wh' questions or prompts** – what, where, when and why questions which are not truly open-ended can still be valuable in deepening the focus of a conversation
  - **distancing questions or prompts** – these prompts are used in story reading to encourage children to make links to the real world (e.g. when reading about a character being scared, asking children whether they have ever felt this way). It helps to make stories meaningful, helps children to connect with story characters and develops their abstract thinking.
9. **Combine a comment and a question** – this can help children to learn the skill of responding to comments and become effective conversation partners.
10. **Invite questions from the children** encourage and support children to ask questions.

## Questions and prompts which promote higher order thinking

### Lower order thinking questions:

Those that require the recall of information.

The child is required to recall facts or previous knowledge



### Higher order thinking questions:

Those that require the manipulation of information and reflection. The child is required to do more cognitive processing to respond to this

#### **Closed questions (yes/no)**

e.g Have you been on a boat?

**Closed questions (one known answer)** Adult may already know the answer, often used for covert evaluation or assessment e.g. What shape is this?

#### **Closed question (answer not known)**

Child holds the answer, which may be subjective rather than pre-determined e.g. Which one is your favourite smartie? Do you want milk or juice?

#### **Open managerial question**

A demand or expectation phrased to sound like a question e.g. Can you go all the way up to 100? Would you like to come and sit on the carpet now? Ben, do you see how Terry is sitting?

#### **Open recall question/distancing prompt**

Encouraging the child to recall information/ behaviour or experiences previously learned or discussed (recall) or to make links from a story to the real world e.g. Do you remember what their carpet is made from.....? What happened after we mixed the ingredients together? Have you ever felt scared like Benny?

#### **Wh question or prompt**

What, where, when and why questions which are not truly open-ended can still be valuable in deepening the focus of a conversation e.g. why did the elephant leave the zoo?

#### **Genuine open question or prompt**

These have no 'right' answer and often begin with 'why' or 'how' e.g. How do you think she felt? What else do you think Fred could have done? Why do you think....? What is the best thing to do? Sometimes a prompt can be more natural than a question, for example speculating or wondering with a child (Mmm, I wonder what is going on here....)

#### **Acknowledgments:**

- Siraj-Blatchford, Iram and Manni, Laura (2008) 'Would you like to tidy up now?' An analysis of adult questioning in the English Foundation Stage', Early Years, 28:1, 5 – 22 (2008)
- Russ Whitehust: Dialogic Reading strategies

