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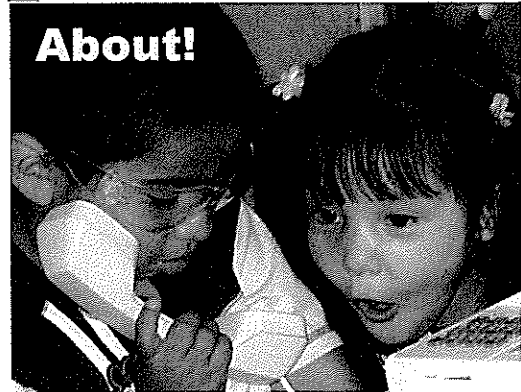
## Let's Give Children Something to

# TALK

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## Oral Language and Preschool Literacy

Kathy Kalmar



### About!

**A CHILD'S FIRST WORDS** are a developmental milestone celebrated by families, with joy. "What amazes me," says Kate Cole, coordinator of Macomb Community College's Early Childhood Studies program, "is that adults are so thrilled when their children say their first word, and then we spend so much time after that telling children to be quiet and listen to us talk!" This indeed is ironic, especially when early childhood educators know about the direct link between oral language development, verbal fluency, and subsequent reading achievement (Morrow 1997).

Oral language is a cognitive tool used to construct meaning, internal-

ize the language used in print, and regulate thought and activity. It is through language that adults mediate children's literacy development and children create meaning (Antonacci & O'Callaghan 2004).

The quality of the words young children hear is crucial for later school and language performance. One study (Hart & Risley 2003) found that 86 to 98 percent of words recorded in the vocabulary of 3-year-olds were words from their parents' vocabularies. Hart and Risley also found that language production at age 3 predicts reading comprehension scores as measured at age 9 to 10. The study shows that when parents offer positive and encouraging experiences, children's vocabularies expand; but when parents speak critically and use harsh, short, and negative talk, their children have much smaller vocabularies (Hart & Risley 2003).

### Is silence golden?

Families, teachers, and principals often view a quiet classroom as a place where learning occurs. They see the busy hum of conversation as noise rather than a sign of learning as children engage in meaningful collaboration. In too-quiet classrooms, children may have to struggle to understand concepts on their own, but in classrooms that value speech, a few words from a classmate or adult can quickly clear up any confusion. For instance, in my classroom, I overheard two children discussing symmetry. One child explained to the other, "It's like your mom's curtains that are in the middle of the window—one half looks just like the other half." "Now I get it," said the classmate.

Talk serves not only to clear up confusion but also to share interests and ideas, expanding children's vocabulary, knowledge base, and understanding. When well-intentioned adults silence children, they imply that what they have to say is more important than children's comments, questions, and concerns. These days, under pressure from No Child Left Behind mandates, some early childhood teach-

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## When children hear high-quality adult speech and when they have the fullest, freest opportunities to talk, they are being taught to read.

ers may feel compelled to use direct instruction (“teacher talk”) more frequently in an attempt to “cover the curriculum” (Kalmar 2002). A heavy emphasis on using approved science-based teaching methods can pressure teachers of young children to teach more content and earlier. As a result, children have fewer opportunities to talk and develop their language skills.

### Valuing talking and listening

The writing-to-read process, including a print-rich environment, supports young children’s literacy development. Similarly, a talk-rich environment is another important element in literacy development (Antonacci & O’Callaghan 2004). A talk-rich environment is an accepting place where teachers encourage young children to talk, and they model the use of stress, pitch, and dialect to help children develop and refine their language skills. When children hear high-quality adult speech and when they have the fullest, freest opportunities to talk, they are being taught to read (Hymes 1965).

From frequent interactions with their teacher, children begin to notice and understand complex sentence structure and the multiple meanings of some words (Kostelnik, Soderman, & Whiren 1999). By listening to teachers talk for a variety of purposes—to comment, provide information, comfort, guide, praise, encourage, show excitement—children construct meaning and build conceptual frameworks

(Smith 2001). They begin to see relationships between what they hear and what the teacher reads. They start making connections between the text and what they know (Smith 2001). Once children begin to retell or reenact stories, they construct their link between oral language and literacy.

For example, one afternoon, to act out *The Mitten*, by Jan Brett, a group of 5-year-olds placed a blanket over a table to make a mitten for them to crawl into. They were discussing which animal was next to fit inside the mitten. One child was convinced it was a rabbit, another said it was a badger, and a third child said it was a bear. They resolved the question by looking at the book and seeing that the next animal was a mouse. By acting out what they remembered, the children showed what they understood, what more they wanted to know, and where they could find answers. The conversation led to variations of the story, which broadened their understanding.

### Using language and creating opportunities to write

Everyday opportunities arise in the classroom to show children how reading and writing work together. Encourage children to dictate a message for an e-mail or greeting card, write a list for grocery shopping, or make a Please Save sign for a block building. Read children’s messages aloud to make sure the writing is what they actually said or wanted to say. In such ways, children learn that print is simply speech written down. They learn that what they say can be written and that once it is written, it can be read. This means children must talk frequently to begin to see this relationship between talking and print.

### Play and oral language

Play is a natural way for children to practice constructing and refining language. Sociodramatic play is linked to literacy (Owocoki 1999). Children use

longer words and more adjectives and adverbs during play (Kostelnik et al. 1998), and the “language used in play is far more complex than that used in regular conversations” (p. 169). In one study, kindergartners’ language during play proved to be a better indicator of language ability than formal assessments such as the Illinois Test of Psycholinguistic Abilities (Levy 1984).

Teachers simply need to set the stage, providing the props and opportunity for children to play, converse, and learn in all areas of the curriculum (see “Classroom Activities That Invite Talk,” p. 90). They make



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## Classroom Activities That Invite Talk

**Sensory play** encourages young children to talk with each other about what they are doing and to launch more conversations. Just stand near the water or sand table and you'll hear wonderful exchanges. Give children playdough and soon they'll be discussing snakes, pizzas, and pancakes. Cornstarch goop, a substance that changes texture when compressed, is guaranteed to get children talking excitedly.

**Blocks** intrigue young children. In block play, children find there are certain conditions and limitations regarding the use of space as well as the use of blocks. By their nature, blocks make talk necessary because children have to communicate with each other to decide what they will build, where they will build it, who will help build, and how the blocks will be transported to the construction zone without causing a problem with someone else who may also be using the blocks. Through block play, discussion can easily ensue as children deal with each other. Block play provides opportunities for children to inform other builders, strategize, exchange ideas, negotiate, problem solve, and resolve construction conflicts through conversation. The give-and-take between builders provides many opportunities for productive conversation, literacy, and social skills.

**Dramatic play** produces a great deal of descriptive language. Children negotiate and develop themes, roles, and rules. Some children like to give directions: "You're the dad and you take us to school. Here's the car. Then the other dad drives the big kids to the big school. It's over here." With these directions in place the play continues until further plot-progression conversations are needed.

Props suggesting a variety of uses and possibilities stimulate interest and talk. Large pieces of cloth, tied together or fastened with a clip, become capes, veils, headdresses, or skirts, depending on the play theme and compelling need. Teachers should make sure plenty of multipurpose materials are on hand so children do not have to wait to use them. Ask parents to donate both male and female clothing and accessories. (My old silver and red satin flats used to generate a lot of interest.) Collect rain gear, men's

ties, Mardi Gras necklaces (those in which the beads are secure), lots of hats, boys' suits and vests, work and fancy gloves, receipts and order pads, telephones, decorative

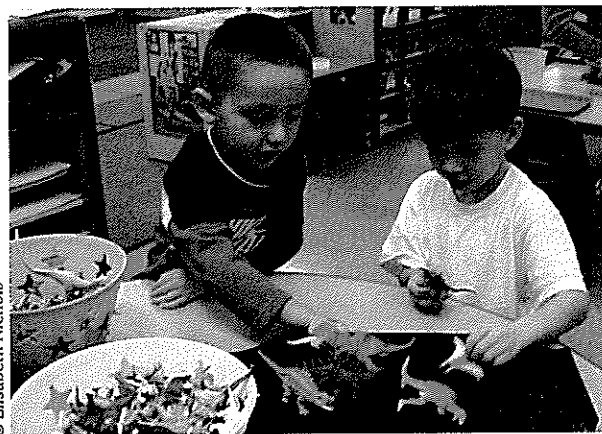
boxes—all kinds of things that invite play. One morning there might be a wedding; that afternoon, a rescue mission. One child in my classroom faced his fear of fire by pretending to be the firefighter rescuing the baby—then just to be even safer, he turned into Superman and blew out the fire.

**Photo albums and scrapbooks** provoke many meaningful conversations. Class books with photos, artwork,

and artifacts from field trips, events, and celebrations generate lots of "Remember when" conversations—not only among children but also among families during pickup/drop-off times or at parent-teacher conferences. A child thumbing through a photo album might recognize a friend, a relative, or himself: "I have my favorite shirt on there" or "Her hair was short then."

Children like to revisit shared experiences: "There's the caterpillar we found on the playground" or "Remember at the farm, on the hayride, when the farmer said it's really straw, not hay?" Zoo-trip photos can get children talking about which mammal, reptile, or amphibian was the most interesting. That could lead to discussing—even creating—animal habitats. After the farm trip, children may be eager to write about, draw, or research something of their choice: "My favorite was the sheep losing his wool coat and was half bald," wrote one child.

**Cooking** with rebus recipes is not only effective in introducing nutrition and good health concepts, but it also can be a rich source of easy and fun talk. In cooking activities, children make connections between literacy, math, and science. They *measure* flour, *crack* eggs, *blend*, and *mix*. Cooking's sensory components—such as the fragile eggshell and the slippery egg inside—prompt discussion and promote new vocabulary. In making scrambled eggs, children can see heat change a liquid into a solid. The children can take digital photos or make drawings of the activity, then add them to the class scrapbook with comments.



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sure there is enough time for extended play sessions.

### Naturally occurring talk

When adults encourage and value talk, most children develop oral language skills naturally. Children learn to talk well by talking with people who model good speech, genuinely listen to children, and elaborate on their responses. Teachers can scaffold children's thinking by asking open-ended questions that do not elicit simple yes or no responses. For example, "Tell me about what you are doing with the blocks" prompts children to

offer more details than simply asking, "What are you doing?" Questions like "What did you hear about \_\_\_\_\_?" "What's happening? What's your plan?" and "How will you use the \_\_\_\_\_ today?" can also stimulate meaningful conversations. Teachers can provoke further investigation and deeper thinking by asking "what if" questions.

Through talking, listening, and conversation, children discover how meaning is transferred from one person to another. They also learn word order, syntax, and novel ways of expressing themselves.

### Getting children talking

Teachers can get children talking by tapping into their prior knowledge or experiences, such as having them recount their visits to grandparents, the dentist, the zoo, or the beach. Often, simply asking 3- to 8-year-olds, "What do you know about \_\_\_\_\_?" accomplishes this with ease.

### Early Writing Skills

By 5½, most children are ready to learn literacy skills such as basic conventions of writing:

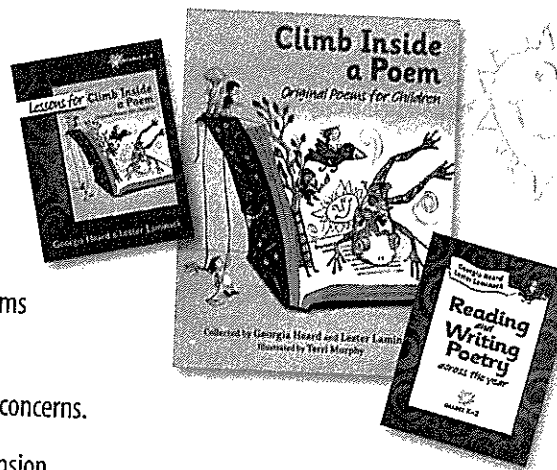
- directionality (for example, writing the letter *t* beginning at the top and going down);
- left-to-right progression (beginning a sentence at the left and writing the letters going right);
- handwriting ("Make a capital by \_\_\_\_\_.");
- punctuation (using quotation marks when people are talking);
- writing for a purpose ("This is what we know about \_\_\_\_\_.");
- phonics (the sounds heard in spoken words); and
- spelling (letters in a specific order).

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Teachers can record on a chart what children say, adding rebus picture clues to reinforce the words. The class can also use the chart to find a needed word, refresh memories, and update the information. In such ways, children actively co-construct literacy concepts, making connections between what they know and how that knowledge can be said, written, and read (see "Early Writing Skills," p. 89).

Teachers can encourage families to also expand and extend children's talk. The home and the neighborhood may present many everyday opportunities for conversation. Parents can enlist a child's help in writing a grocery list, keeping track of the various birds that come to the feeder, preparing for a visit to the dentist, or going to the library to find out more about the ants in the backyard.

### Talk-rich environments

Many types of experiences and activities create a talk-rich preschool environment. A well-stocked classroom offers many interesting items to explore. Children can observe, examine, explore, manipulate, and discuss things such as birds' nests, crystals, and the class guinea pig. Teachers make sure there are lots of paper choices and available writing tools, child-size pointers, clipboards, wipe boards, and more. Functional print, such as a sign near the fishbowl saying, "I've Been Fed" or "Please Feed Me," provides practical and useful information. Language skills grow when everywhere children look, the room abounds with their printed or dictated words.

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Talk-rich classrooms feature and display quality books that are well chosen, richly illustrated, and inviting. There are multiple copies of popular books and comfortable seating to encourage reading together. Also on the open-faced shelves are class-made books and photo albums, magazines, even toy and equipment catalogs, to capture children's attention. Nothing encourages rich talk more than pictures of classmates and families. A picture is literally worth a thousand words because it can generate a thousand words.



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### Conclusion

Oral language is a cornerstone of literacy learning. While reading is the process of constructing meaning from text, young children initially get many clues to meaning when they hear spoken language accompanied by voice inflection, facial expression, and gestures. All these factors combine to help children get the message.

The benefits of encouraging talk in the classroom are endless. Activities like those suggested in this article and in its accompanying box definitely get children talking. So how about it? Let's give children something to talk about. Then, let them do the talking—and perhaps even the shushing!

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