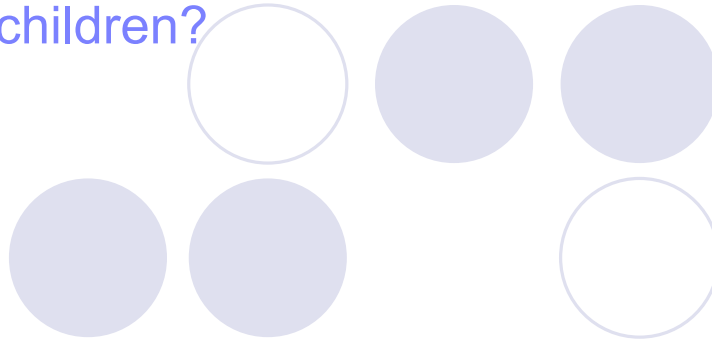


# Oral Language



California Preschool Instructional Network  
A project of the California Department of Education  
Child Development Division

Did you know that you can support early literacy through conversations with children?

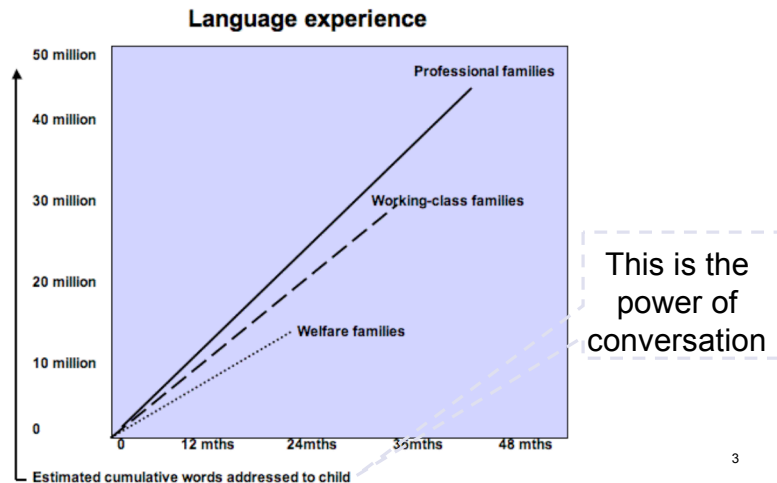


Based on the research of  
David Dickinson  
Peabody College of Education  
Vanderbilt University

- David Dickerson, Pat Tabors, Susan Neuman, Catherine Snow and many other researchers in language and literacy have determined that language-based interactions - such as one-on-one conversations are critical to early literacy learning and long-term literacy success.

## Research on children's oral language experience shows:

Hart & Risely, *Meaningful Differences*, Brookes Publishing



- Hart & Risley's 1995 research findings in "***Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children***" found that children's language experience differed greatly based on their family's socio-economic status.
- Children reaching their preschool years in Professional families had over 45 million words addressed to them; children in Working-class families had about 30 million words presented in their environments; and children in Welfare families had only 12 million words offered in their lives.
- The number and variety of vocabulary words children hear in their everyday lives can make a difference in children's early literacy.

## Vocabulary learning is based on the oral language children hear, 1 on 1:

30 and 36 months (Hart & Risely, 1995)

	Professional Families	Welfare families
Vocabulary at 30 months	766 recorded words	357 recorded words
Vocabulary learned in 6 months	350 recorded words	168 recorded words

4

- Hart and Risely also found that at 30 months - children in Professional families had nearly twice as many vocabulary words as did the children of Welfare families. And that within the brief span of 6 months, children in Professional families again nearly doubled their vocabulary when compared to the vocabulary gained by children in Welfare families.
- We clearly see that POVERTY - with stress lives, limited time with children, fewer books, educational activities, health challenges and depression have an impact on children's educational success.
- Additionally, parents' inadequate education and limited knowledge of English contribute to restrictions in exposure to varied, rich vocabulary.

## Research demonstrates that children:

- learn vocabulary through:
  - extended and responsive 1 on 1 conversations,
  - sharing and hearing personal experiences,
  - hearing and talking about books and stories.
- learn English language syntax by:
  - having teachers provide grammatically correct language models,
  - hearing good books regularly,
- learn to read earlier because of experience with complex uses of oral language.

5

- The good news is that preschool teachers, armed with this research, can make significant differences in all children's language and emergent literacy. The research shows that having an adult who provides a good language model and engages children to TALK and LISTEN in a fun, respectful and caring manner can support complex uses of language in both oral language and print.

## 1 on 1 conversations provide:

- caring, individual time to build a close teacher-child relationship,
- rich vocabulary,
- listening and experimenting with words and the sounds of language,
- talk that stretches thinking about experiences & stories that develop over time.



6

- Research tells us that close teacher-child relationships are linked to children's rate of language growth. Close teacher-child relationships also form a positive climate for more extended and intellectually challenging conversations. Teachers learn more about children through extended conversations and make effective conversations easier.
- 1 on 1 conversations communicate that children and their ideas are valued.
- Stronger teacher-child relationships lead to improved long-term academic success.

## In conversations, children learn to:

- take turns - listening & speaking,
- put ideas into words,
- check for understanding,
- use gestures and intonation to signal feelings,
- use eye gaze to maintain attention.



7

- Research also shows that children learn vocabulary BEST when introduced within a familiar context. That means presenting new vocabulary from good books, shared experiences, materials and activities in the preschool environment.
- Preschool teachers can model good conversation skills, integrating familiar and new vocabulary, checking for understanding, and using objects, gestures and physical movement to support understanding.

## Challenges can be overcome...

- Children who are English language learners, as well as children with slow language and early literacy development:
  - have the ability to learn, (Skill in the first language transfers to other learned languages.)
  - can make rapid progress when they are provided with:
    - strong emotional support (reduce anxiety - make it fun!)
    - opportunities to be drawn into conversations, through single words, gestures and pantomime.
- Children have better long-term academic success when they have a strong first language.

- It is important to recognize that the challenges children present are the result of limited access to language and rich vocabularies in their early years. Those limitations are not present in the preschool classroom. ALL children have the ability to develop language and literacy - given fun, encouraging, robust language-rich environments.
- If preschool staff have language skills in the child's first language, support maintenance and development of that language as learning concepts are introduced and extended.
- Research on second language acquisition reveals that children can continue to use their first language as they learn English language vocabulary and syntax. It also shows that they will experience better long-term school success when their first language is supported.



## Preschool classrooms can provide many opportunities to:

- **speak** using familiar and new vocabulary,
- **listen** to rich vocabulary and extended ideas,
- **see and experiment** with letter and print,
- **read and write** using sound-symbol correspondence and phonemic awareness.



9

- Preschool classrooms provide LONG-TERM benefits which include improved language and literacy skills at the end of kindergarten and improved language and literacy skills at end of fourth grade.
- Catherine Snow's research indicates that above-average fourth grade vocabulary predicted above-average twelfth grade vocabulary as well.

## Keys to engaging children in conversation:

- Plan individualized teacher-child conversations throughout the day, across all activities.

- Intentionally engage children to:

- orally share their ideas,
- clarify their thinking,
- extend the current topic,
- use vocabulary learning and precise use of language



- Share your own experience without taking over.

10

- Research by Susan Kontos showed that even though children were often less than 3 feet away, 81% of the time, teachers did not talk to children. Gene Lozar's study "Life in Preschool" showed that in 20% of 119 classrooms, 50% + children had no interaction with teachers all day.
- That data would not be found in classrooms where teachers PLAN to engage children to converse about their experiences and ideas.
- Be INTENT in making a difference in young children's development of language and literacy ... interact, listen and model.

## Keys to effective book reading and discussion:

- Read books regularly - several times each day.
- Read in an engaging manner.
- Define unfamiliar vocabulary in a child-friendly manner.
- Encourage children to discuss the:
  - plot of the book,
  - characters,
  - vocabulary,
  - sequence of actions



11

- Become familiar with each book BEFORE you share it with children. Identify vocabulary that may need to be defined so you are prepared to support understanding. Consider which illustrations can be pointed out to support vocabulary, characters, and actions. Then you are prepared to read the story aloud. Use tone and inflection to build interest in the story plot, give depth to characters, support comprehension of vocabulary.
- After reading, encourage children to discuss the story to scaffold each child's experience, increase clarity and even relate the story to their own experience.
- Others are encouraged to listen and see peers and teachers as conversational partners.

## Keys to effective and connected learning activities:

- Plan activities that engage children's interests and focus on the current theme and focused vocabulary.
- Reinforce the curriculum theme, vocabulary and concepts throughout the day.
- Encourage the use of the focused vocabulary and concepts in all learning centers.
- Respect children's minds, ideas, and opinions.

12

- Plan intellectually engaging experiences for children. Foster children's natural curiosity by asking them to wonder. Model thinking and discussing ideas that pose possibilities.
- Build environments and activities that promote pretending and intellectual exploration. For example, based on a theme of "Friends", you share Ezra Jack Keats' book, "Louie". After the story, you provide hand puppets for children to use in puppet shows; a large box for children to design a puppet stage; socks and material scraps for designing hand puppets; and offer plenty of time for children to present their own puppet shows and discuss the shows, stories, experiences, puppets, friends, and much more.

## Provide daily opportunities for children to:



- tell stories about their ideas and experiences.
- dictate or write about stories, characters, and roles.
- imagine and wonder about new ideas.
- have meaningful conversations with caring adults.



13

- Occasions that provide a good way to engage children into conversations include: - recounting past and future events; discussing objects that are not present; considering ideas and language; speculating, wondering, and pretending.

## Enrich children's vocabulary by:

- Using varied words.
- Expressing ideas in full sentences; do not avoid adult-like grammar.
- Expanding the child's comments, but don't take over.
- Presuming their knowledge about a topic is limitless.



14

- When a child says in conversation, “I was sleeping, then I opened his eyes.” You increase varied vocabulary by saying “I see, you woke up.”
- Model correct syntax, when a child says, “My eyes was open.” You model, “Your eyes were open.”
- Tailor questions that go beyond “open-ended”, intentionally seek clarity. Really try to understand.
- Work with staff as a team, so that during your conversation time, you can model good listening by ignoring distractions.

## To get started...

meals, choice time,  
waiting, transition times

### Work with classroom staff to:

- identify times throughout the day that are conducive to teacher-child conversations.
- establish staff roles to ensure at least one teacher can engage in 1-1 conversations.
- set up routines that foster 1-1 conversations.
- create plans to ensure that all children engage in 1-1 conversations regularly.

15

- During small group discussions focus on information with appropriate instructional purpose and keeping interest high. Build small group time into the schedule everyday.
- During 1 on 1 conversations listen to what each child says, encourage clarification, use varied vocabulary, and extend the topic that is of interest to the child.

## Guiding Principles

- Teach with the intention of supporting early literacy through 1-1 conversations.
- Observe and watch for opportunities to engage children in 1-1 conversations.
- Enjoy listening, speaking, reading and writing with young children.
- Believe in the importance of the work you do **today** for each child's **tomorrows**.

16

- In this session, we have learned that research shows that children have few conversations and teachers and that extended conversations are rare.
- We have also learned that preschool teachers can make an important and positive difference in the academic future of preschool children. Work together with your staff team to intentionally plan conversations with children into the daily schedule; become aware of opportunities for 1 - 1 and small group conversations; set goals and collaborate with preschool colleagues to make a difference.





## Connections to DRDP

Measure 13: Engages in conversations that develop a thought or idea.

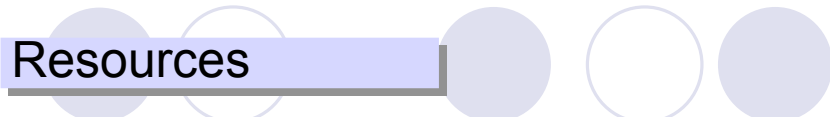
Measure 15: Experiments with new vocabulary, etc.

Measure 34: Engages in discussions about books.



17

- The Desired Results Developmental Profile requires observations of children engaging in conversations and discussions, as well as integrating new vocabulary.



## Resources

Beginning Literacy With Language. Dickinson & Tabors. Brookes Publishing: 2001

Bringing Words to Life. Isabel Beck et. al. Guilford Press: 2002

Handbook of Early Literacy Research. Neuman & Dickinson. Guilford Publishing: 2001

18

- To read more about Dickinson and his colleagues' research on early literacy and the importance of oral language, read these books.

A decorative header consisting of five circles in a row. The first circle is solid light blue, the second is a white outline, the third is solid light blue, the fourth is a white outline, and the fifth is solid light blue. A light blue horizontal bar with a dark blue outline is positioned over the first two circles, containing the text '^Resources'.

## ^Resources

Meaningful Differences. Hart & Risley.  
Brookes Publishing:1995

One Child, Two Languages. Patton Tabors.  
Brookes Publishing:1997

Teaching 4 to 8-Year-Olds. Carolee Howes.  
Brookes Publishing: 2003