

Engaging Children in Conversations

Narrator: Welcome to this short in-service on engaging children in conversations. In this in-service, you'll learn how to get started in conversations with children and how important these conversations can be to young children's development and learning.

The National Center on Quality Teaching and Learning uses the House Framework to illustrate the components that are necessary for supporting school readiness for all children. Conversations are part of the foundation of our House. That is, conversations are a key feature of engaging interactions and environments. Conversations are back-and-forth verbal exchanges. Through these exchanges, children and adults share information, observations, ideas, thoughts, and feelings.

Conversations are important because they enhance children's language skills. During the early childhood years, children are gaining vocabulary and learning how language works. Conversations with more skilled speakers, like adults, can help. Conversations also foster children's cognitive development. Through the exchange of information and ideas, children learn new concepts and how to express those concepts and wonder about them. Conversations also enhance children's social development. Conversations are social interactions and involve give and take, listening and responding.

This in-service provides guidance for getting started on engaging children in conversations and strategies to keep the conversations going. Many teachers are already skilled conversationalists. This in-service may serve as a reminder that might be useful for the occasional child who seems uninterested. These strategies may also be helpful for aides and volunteers who haven't had that much practice in conversations with young children. Also, be aware that adults have a tendency to dominate conversations with children. Waiting your turn and a little bit of silence are key to productive conversations.

Here are a few hints for setting the stage and getting started in a conversation with a child. Get at the child's level. You should be able to see the child's face and the child should be able to see yours. Listen to what the child has to say or watch carefully to see what the child is interested in. Match your tone to the child's affect. If the child is happy and excited, show your pleasure. If the child is worried and serious, show your concern. Make sure to provide opportunities for turn-taking.

Here are a few more suggestions to keep the conversation going. Comment on what the child is doing or saying. Ask questions related to what the child is doing or saying. Wait or pause; really listen. Respond by adding a little more. You can repeat or clarify or expand on the child's ideas. And pause again to give the child a chance to take their own turn.

Let's look and listen to a teacher and child having a conversation.

[Video begins] Teacher: Okay, is the baby ready? I'm back. I can hold your baby for you.

Girl: It's my baby.

Teacher: Is this your baby? What's her name?

Girl 1: Gretchen.

Teacher: Did you say Griffin?

Girl 2: Diamond.

Teacher: Diamond. I like that name. That's a beautiful name.

Girl 1: Gretchen is a baby.

Teacher: So have we already fed her breakfast?

Girl 2: Not yet. There's cupcakes. [Video ends]

Narrator: Think about what you've just seen. Did the teacher get at the child's eye level? Did she comment or ask questions? Did she wait so that the child could take a turn?

This in-service highlighted some of the benefits of conversations for children. Conversations can take place throughout the day: at arrival and departure; during snacks and meals; and during play and activities.

Thank you for listening. Check out our tips for teachers and other resources to help engage children in conversations. There's lots more to learn about conversations, so see our other in-services on this topic. Most of all, have fun having conversations with your children and hearing about all they know and how much they want to learn. Thank you.