

Good practice and great ideas to help children develop their speech, language and communication

Number 1: Good practice

Developing sustained shared thinking

A nursery setting wanted to maximise the interaction opportunities arising from activities shared by children and adults. They wanted to develop more sustained shared thinking, where adults and children worked together to solve a problem or extend an interest or activity, with all parties contributing ideas. This way, the children would learn to develop their ideas more independently and the adults would gain a better understanding of the children's skills, knowledge and understanding.

They agreed to...

- Observe children's play and listen carefully to their conversations and ideas
- Discuss with the children what they are doing, using open-ended questions, such as "what do you think will happen if...?", "how shall we...?" and "what do you think we should do?"
- Support the children to build on their ideas, while continuing to allow them to lead
- Resist taking over the play and finding solutions when problems arose, instead supporting the children to find their own answers

Here's an example of where this worked...

Ben and Jack (aged 4) were in the pre-school room, arguing over a superhero costume. Sophie, the practitioner, went over to support them. She held the costume and encouraged the children to discuss the problem, providing vocabulary where it appeared to be needed, such as "is that making you feel angry?" and posed open questions like "what can we do, so you both feel happy?". When Jack suggested they share, Sophie followed this up by asking, "how can you share one costume?". The boys decided between them, that one would wear the cape and the other would wear the bandana!

Number 1: Great idea

Sometimes it is good to get things wrong! Children love to correct adults and this can really motivate them to talk...plus it's fun! So, from time to time...

- Forget the words to a song or rhyme
- Search for something you know the children can easily find
- Make statements you know are wrong, such as "this cat's got three eyes" or "I'm eating a banana" (when it's actually an apple)
- Forget how to do something, such as putting a puzzle together or building a brick tower

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Number 2: Great idea

A practitioner in the pre-school room noticed that the children became very unsettled at snack time with lots of boisterous behaviour, banging cups on the table and shouting. She discussed with her colleagues how this part of the day could be improved and together they identified that snack time took nearly 30 minutes (including taking children to wash their hands), so for much of the time, the children were sitting at the table with very little to occupy them.

They didn't want to lose the group snack time, as they felt it offered opportunities for children to talk together and learn other social skills, therefore they decided to alter the routine slightly:

- They split the children into smaller groups and ensured a member of staff was seated at each group's table
- When the children sat down at their snack table, after washing their hands, they joined in with some singing and action rhymes
- The snack items were ready on a tray, including plates, cups and small jugs, which the children were encouraged to hand out to one another, along with choosing their own food and pouring their own drinks
- As the children were eating, different topics of conversation were introduced

The relatively small changes made a big difference and, over time, even the quieter children began to join in and talk to their peers. Snack time became a planned and effective time for talking, rather than just a time for eating.

Number 3: Good practice

A day care setting makes regular assessments of children's communication skills using the Talking Matters profiles. Staff check what the children know, identify any gaps in their skills and plan for their next steps. This results in children making rapid progress and being confident and independent learners.

An integrated health review discussion takes place for each child, at around 26 months, between the child's key person, parent and health visitor. Even if they can't always meet together in person, this process jointly reviews the child's health, development and learning, and has a particularly positive impact on providing early intervention and support. Where there are concerns about a child's progress, the integrated health review process ensures these are quickly addressed through the appropriate referrals.

Number 4: Good practice

In a nursery with a comfortable book area, staff noticed that children weren't making much use of the books. The books were stored in a large box bookcase, but as there were a lot of books, it wasn't possible to see the front covers clearly. This meant children often found it difficult to make choices.

The books were re-organised using small shelves and baskets, which enabled staff to clearly display the front covers of the books. This meant children not only made deliberate choices from the books available, but also used the book area more frequently.

The inclusion of some related props for favourite stories, also encouraged children to talk about the books, which improved concentration. The provision of a special dinosaur book basket, further supported the interest of a child with autism, who was delighted and able to share his enthusiasm with other children.

Number 4: Great idea

Practise commenting...

Mia (2.6 years old) was in the pre-school garden, when she saw a digger. She held up her hand so an adult would stop and they waited while she observed carefully. When she said “dig dig”, the adult responded by saying “it is a digger, it’s a big, yellow digger”. Mia then pointed to the tyres and said “going”, so again, the adult built on what she had said by adding “the tyres go round and round. They make the digger go”.

When the digger began scooping soil, Mia moved her arm and her eyes followed the movement of the scoop. The adult commented “the big scoop is going up. It’s full of soil, it’s full of mud”.

Number 5: Good practice

Adapting role play to develop communication skills:

In response to numerous children arriving in their reception class, speaking only 30 to 40 words, the school expected adults to model activities in their role play area. In the doctor’s surgery, for example, teachers played and pretended to be a doctor or nurse, modelling the kinds of questions that encourage children to respond.

The school filmed the role play and put it on an interactive white board, so children were continually exposed to the language and type of role play that staff expected. Children were able to copy, learn the vocabulary and then extend the role play using their creativity and imagination.

(Taken from [Are you ready? Good practice in school readiness](#): Ofsted April 2014)

Number 5: Great idea

Dummies and soothers can be a source of comfort when children are upset or may form part of a sleep routine. However, they can contribute to delayed speech and language development, as well as affecting children’s teeth.

When children are sucking on a dummy, they will make fewer sounds, and if they attempt to talk around the teat, they may learn distorted patterns of speech. It is best to try and wean a child off the dummy by 12 months old.

A small pre-school made a special effort to discuss this issue with parents and used posters and leaflets from their local speech and language therapy department to provide more information. They also introduced visits from the ‘dummy elf’, to help children give up their dummies

(Take a look at the [Children’s Speech and Language Therapy Resources](#))

Number 6: Good practice

Create a visually supportive environment within your setting.

If children are having difficulty understanding what is said to them, find it hard to follow routines or have limited spoken language, then using visual supports is crucial. A school nursery made changes to their environment, in order to increase its visual cues. They:

- Made a simple visual timetable showing the basic nursery routine with photos and referred to it throughout the day
- Made additional photo cues to support handwashing, fetching aprons for messy play, lunchtimes and getting ready to go home
- Ensured all toy boxes were clearly labelled with a picture of the contents
- Used props during storytelling
- Used objects of reference to show the children what was happening next and to help them make choices

Number 6: Great idea

Kate, a childminder, was supporting Victor, a child with speech, language and communication needs, who had very limited spoken language. He was beginning to learn Signalong, so Kate decided to learn some signs, so she could communicate more effectively with him.

The first time Kate signed back to Victor, he looked so surprised and really pleased. She started by adding some Signalong to simple rhymes and songs and gradually added a few more signs each week. She asked Victor's dad which signs he was using at home and learnt these too.

Kate began to continuously use Signalong for key words, as she realised other children were also benefitting and it improved their communication with Victor.

Number 7: Great idea

An outstanding day care setting provided play and language workshops, to help parents and carers understand and develop ways to support their children's communication development.

Over three separate sessions, families were invited to practical workshops covering:

- The importance of communication
- Ideas on talking and playing with their children every day
- Sharing books, rhymes and songs

The themes covered in the workshops were reinforced through information and activity ideas on the setting's social media page and through the children's online learning journeys. Parents and carers were also invited to regular story, song and rhyme sessions.

Number 8: Good practice

A nursery manager noticed that several children in her setting had frequent colds and ear infections / glue ear. She spoke to her staff and to the locality Health Visitor and realised that this could mean that children, from time to time, were experiencing intermittent hearing loss. This would be impacting on their language development, as they would find it harder to 'tune in' to people using language around them and may not be able to focus on the sounds in words.

The setting decided to take some steps to improve adult / child interaction, specifically for those with glue ear, but ultimately for all children as good practice. Staff would help make listening and learning language easier by:

- Getting the child's attention before starting to talk
- Making sure the adult faced the child as much as possible and at group times, making sure each child was seated so they could see the adult's face
- Checking background noises were kept to a minimum
- Speaking clearly, without shouting, and maintaining a normal rhythm of speech
- Keeping language simple
- Using gestures and other visual cues

Staff would also carefully monitor these children, as there may be other reasons for their speech and language delay.

Number 9: Good practice

Daya's keyperson, Alydia, became concerned about Daya's language development, when considering her language skills in preparation for her two year old progress check. At this point, Daya was 2 years and 3 months old and using only a few English words, such as no, more, dog and all gone. Her home language is Malayalam and whilst her dad speaks some English, her mum only speaks a little and neither can read English.

Alydia asked both parents to come to the nursery to discuss Daya's progress. She encouraged them to bring a friend or relative along to support with translation, which they did. Together they looked at the ECAT child monitoring tool, to work out Daya's communication skills in her home language. At home she was using two or three word phrases and was rapidly learning new words and understood simple instructions. Mum showed Alydia footage on her phone of Daya having a conversation with her grandma, where she was clearly communicating confidently.

It was agreed that Daya's parents would continue to support her development of Malayalam at home, whilst Alydia would include Daya in small group play with one or two other children, focussed on modelling English vocabulary. She would also focus on words associated with Daya's special interests, which were snack time, ball play and bikes. This would all be carefully monitored and re-assessed at the end of term.

Number 9: Great idea

A village pre-school welcomed three year old Stefan, who was newly arrived in the UK from Romania. His Romanian language skills were developing well, but he wasn't speaking any English yet. His mum only spoke a little English and Stefan, who hadn't been to a pre-school before, was finding it difficult to be separated from his mum. He cried when he was dropped off and remained upset for a long time each morning.

The staff decided to help by making him a communication book. They took photos of important things in the pre-school, such as the toilet, his preferred toys, drinks bottle and staff, along with people and things from home, including his parents, grandma, cat and garden. These were labelled in both Romanian and English, with help from mum and the internet, and Stefan took his book home with him, so his mum could help him understand the pictures.

The staff were then able to use the book within the setting to help Stefan understand what was happening during the day and when his mum would be back. He could also use it to ask for things he needed and enabled staff to learn the Romanian names for a few basic things, all of which helped Stefan to feel more settled and at home.