

Every Child a Talker: Guidance for early language lead practitioners

Second Instalment: Spring 2009

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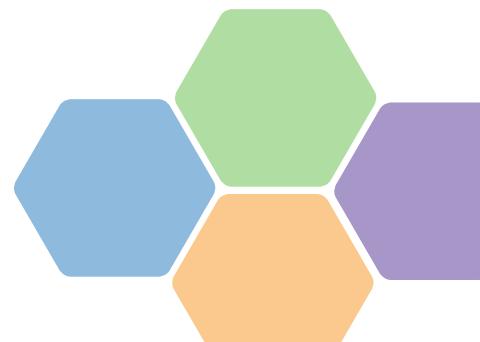


Every Child a Talker: Guidance for early language lead practitioners

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department for
children, schools and families



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Examples of language-focused activities

In the following pages of this guidance you will find some examples of specific language activities that will support language learning. These examples are appropriate for use in adult-led activities with small groups of children, most of whom will be three years of age or over. The activities are designed around the four themes of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and are intended to complement the rich language provision that has now been established in your setting.

Why do specific activities?

Every Child a Talker (ECAT) settings will already be providing a range of activities and experiences that will enhance children's language skills. However, you may well have noticed through your observation and monitoring that some children choose not to access these opportunities and some activities do not provide children with enough exposure to adult language that supports their developing language skills. For example, adult language that focuses on controlling behaviour or organising activities is associated with restricted and less complex language use by the children. Importantly, relatively large doses of high-quality language input are required to accelerate language development in early years settings. Good oral language input is particularly important for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

It is therefore important to ensure that all children have regular access to experiences where the focus is planned specifically to develop their oral language. The activities described on the following pages fulfil that purpose. They should be enjoyable and age-appropriate and include games, story activities and discussions. The most important thing is the nature of the adult's talk. Talk should be child-centred (about what a child is doing), semantically contingent (repeating the content of what the child has said) and embedded in familiar interactive routines or scripts. Your early language consultant (ELC) will help you to plan and organise these activities so that they provide the maximum benefit to the children who need it most.

At the end of this section there are some examples of dialogic book reading. This is a way of sharing books which really helps children to develop their language, particularly to learn new vocabulary and to support language for thinking. Two books have been selected and in the examples you will see how to use them to implement dialogic book reading. Your ELC will help you to develop dialogic book reading in your setting, using the books you already have and which the children really will enjoy.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Role-play

why? Role-play provides opportunities to extend children's experiences and vocabulary, and to develop their use of imagination and the ability to translate ideas into oral language.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- contributes to activities
- engages in problem-solving
- creates imaginary scenarios
- develops their own ideas.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- listening to others and sharing ideas
- negotiating tasks
- cooperative play with others
- practising turn-taking
- developing the ability to converse with peers and adults.

Enabling Environments

Choose a theme that is inspired by the children's interests, the time of year or a current event.

Develop children's own ideas and build on their imaginations.

Provide props and costumes linked to particular themes and interests.

Rotate the themes regularly to keep in tune with children's interests and enthusiasms.

Before you introduce the themes, read stories related to them and provide acting-out opportunities supported by an adult participating in the role-play. You can facilitate play by joining in and modelling appropriate language and story scripts. Allow the children to use the props to be creative. Support language development by listening, asking open-ended questions, recasting and expanding utterances, providing contrastive feedback to children and redirecting a child to request items from another child. These activities can take place indoors and outdoors, for example going to a farm or going camping.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – What's happening?

Why? Narrative talk provides children with the skills to recount events and draw links between different activities. As children develop their vocabularies and extend the sentences they produce, they begin to create their own personal narratives. Oral narratives provide children with the tools to develop written narratives.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- provides descriptions of their views of events
- explains links between events
- retells stories
- develops language to support links between events
- builds an understanding of the needs of listeners.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- listening and valuing contributions
- extending descriptions
- making links between experiences
- developing ideas and explanations.

Enabling Environments

Collect a series of pictures that represent activities and experiences that are familiar for the children, for example going to the shops, visiting the doctor. Choose pictures that can be linked together to tell a story – three pictures is a good starting number. In small groups let the children describe each picture.

You can support the description by asking questions and developing links between the children's own experiences and the pictures. For example, you might choose three pictures about going to the shops: leaving the house with a bag, being at the shop and then paying.

As you show the first picture, ask the children: 'What is happening here?' 'What do you think she'll do next?' 'When do you go shopping?'

The activity can also be made into a game by introducing puppets or stuffed animals. One puppet could be introduced at the beginning and a second hidden for later – so there is a reason to retell the story. Make sure that you encourage all children to take part in the conversation. It might seem a little difficult at first, but once the children are used to the task, conversation will flow more easily and you can encourage them to talk to each other as well as to the puppet.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – What does it look like?

Why? Expository talk is the use of language to describe, explain or provide information. It involves precise use of language and is important for children's development of factual language, and later for non-fiction writing.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- describes an object listing characteristics and features
- explains how two things are alike or different
- provides solutions to problems.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- listening to children's ideas and suggestions
- providing time and opportunities to discuss characteristics
- discussing similarities and differences.

Enabling Environments

Fill a bag with different interesting toys such as animals, vehicles or fruit. Get the children to help you and let them decide which sets of objects they would like to collect. Keep to the same class of objects. In small groups give each child an opportunity to pick an object out of the bag and describe it to the group. When each child has an object, ask the children for as many differences and similarities as they can think of between two objects. You can facilitate by asking open-ended questions and highlighting contrasts. A variation on the game is to give each child an egg box and ask them to find six objects to put in the compartments. Then they close the lid and describe their choices to the rest of the group.

Can the others guess what the objects are?

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment –

Action and object games

Why? These games offer opportunities to develop vocabulary, support children's ability to describe activities and events and express their feelings, and provide the basis for developing later reading comprehension.

A Unique Child

who is valued and listened to:

- contributes to activities
- develops ideas
- engages in problem-solving
- understands and learns new vocabulary.

Positive Relationships

that build and support communication by:

- listening to others and sharing ideas
- taking turns
- playing games cooperatively
- respecting different views and feelings.

Enabling Environments

Using games such as 'Simon Says', and activities, for example about the weather, to introduce object words and action words, you can develop vocabulary to support children's interests. Provide additional prompts to scaffold and extend the children's responses. Introduce the targeted object words in picture form. Action words are introduced by asking the children to perform relevant actions for the game or activity. For example, teaching words for body parts can begin with a song, such as 'Head, shoulders, knees and toes'. Then show the children pictures of body parts and ask them to identify these. You can then get the children to wiggle their noses, point to their toes and wave their arms. If you are developing vocabulary about the weather, you can start with a song such as 'It's raining, it's pouring', and then show children pictures of different types of weather and ask them to identify these and pick the one that best describes the day's weather. You can then develop 'feeling' words with the children to describe how different weather makes them feel inside.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – The obstacle course

Why? These games offer opportunities to develop vocabulary, support children's ability to describe activities and events and express their feelings, and provide the basis for developing reading comprehension.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- contributes to activities
- develops their own ideas
- engages in problem-solving
- understands and learns new vocabulary.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- listening to others and sharing ideas
- practising turn-taking
- playing games cooperatively
- respecting different views and feelings.

Enabling Environments

This activity can be used to reinforce the concepts of over, under, in, through, around and beside while practising gross motor skills and following directions. Use a large open room, or preferably go outdoors. Prepare the space with objects that are safe for children to go over, under and around. Let the children design the course themselves; the design may be linked to a favourite story. You could make it more exciting by turning it into a bear hunt, or even a dinosaur hunt! As a group, go over the first sequence of directions (e.g. crawl under the table, then jump over the cushion, step in the hula hoop). To begin with, make the directions short and simple and be prepared to join in! As children get familiar with the activity, sequences can be extended or reversed. Some children might like to give the instructions to the rest of the group.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Naming games

Why? These games offer opportunities to develop vocabulary, support children's ability to describe activities and events and express their feelings, and provide the basis for developing reading comprehension.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- contributes to activities
- develops their own ideas
- engages in problem-solving
- understands and learns new vocabulary.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- listening to others and sharing ideas
- practising turn-taking
- playing games cooperatively
- respecting different views and feelings.

Enabling Environments

Organise a visit related to the children's particular interests, for example to the supermarket, the vet or the park.

Prepare a large picture of the location – you can use any place which contains lots of different objects. Use the setting's digital camera to document the visits, including the journey there.

Then, for each location collect pictures and photos of seven objects that would be found there and five that would not. Laminate the pictures and put some reusable sticky pads on the back. Ask the children to name the objects that belong in the specific location and then to stick the objects on the location. The game can be followed up by asking children to think of other things that can be found in the location. As the children become more familiar with the game, introduce new locations, take suggestions from the children and be creative!

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Who am I?

Why? Expository talk is the use of language to describe, explain or provide information. It involves precise use of language and is important for children's development of factual language and later for non-fiction writing.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- describes people and families, talking about similarities and differences
- identifies unique personal characteristics.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- listening to and sharing ideas
- building self-esteem
- taking turns
- playing games cooperatively
- respecting different views and feelings.

Enabling Environments

Sharing activities about family as well as themselves allows children to develop their individual identity and to describe key points they want others to know about themselves, their likes and their dislikes.

Ask the children, mums and dads to bring in family pictures or photographs to share with their group. Each child describes their family members and the activities that they do together. Give children plenty of time to think about their descriptions and for other children to pose their own questions.

This activity can be developed by allowing children to take the photos themselves. Provide disposable cameras for them to take photos of their favourite things and family members. Adults can scribe their descriptions and the photos can be made up into a book or posters for the whole group to share.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Story talk

Why? Narrative talk provides children with the skills to recount events and draw links between different activities. As children develop their vocabularies and extend the sentences they produce, they begin to create narratives. Oral narratives underpin later development of written narratives.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- understands the sequence of a story or song
- retells stories adding their own details
- develops language to support links between events
- builds an understanding of the needs of listeners.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- listening to and valuing contributions
- extending descriptions
- making links between experiences
- developing ideas and explanations.

Enabling Environments

Make story sacks which include props and objects related to children's favourite stories. Make up a game using three or more containers that fit inside each other. On each container place pictures from a book or song that you are going to share. You could use small-world toys or objects instead. As you tell the story or sing the song, remove the containers one by one, according to the image on each. When you are finished, they all nest back together, and the children enjoy recalling the information themselves. For example, if you use the nursery rhyme "There was an old lady who swallowed a spider", you can have a container for each animal the old lady swallows. Put one container on top of the other as the old lady swallows the animals. Then let the children remove each one as they name the animal. Children can then take turns leading the activity themselves.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Dialogic book talk activity
Why? To acknowledge and extend children's experiences and develop their vocabulary

1. Prepare!

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- contributes to discussion
- relates the story content to their own experience
- develops their own ideas.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- sharing experiences
- gaining insight into the feelings of others
- learning to interpret the behaviour of others
- listening to and empathising with others
- developing the ability to converse with peers and adults.

Enabling Environments

Choose a picture book that will appeal to the group of children. If you want to read the whole story, make sure the written text is brief: the main objective is to get the children talking. The first example book is a suitable length for reading and talking through the whole story.

Before you start the activity

- Make sure you are very familiar with the story.
- Think about the kinds of questions and prompts you will use to encourage children to think and talk about the story.
- Remember the golden rules: ask open-ended questions; recast and expand what children say.
- Think about the ways in which children might be able to relate the story to their own lives.
- Think about the new vocabulary that you will introduce in reading and talking about the story.
- Think about follow-up activities to consolidate this vocabulary.

The next few pages give two examples of ways in which you might use a picture book in dialogic book talk, to acknowledge and extend children's experience, and develop their vocabulary.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Dialogic book talk activity

Why? To acknowledge and extend children's experiences and develop their vocabulary
First example of dialogic book talk: *The Bear Under the Stairs*.

2. Ask open-ended questions about the story.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- contributes to discussion
- relates the story content to their own experience
- develops their own ideas.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- sharing experiences
- gaining insight into the feelings of others
- learning to interpret the behaviour of others
- listening to and empathising with others
- developing the ability to converse with peers and adults.

Enabling Environments

The Bear Under the Stairs tells the story of William, who is scared because he imagines there is a bear living under the stairs, and how William's mum helps him overcome this fear. Open-ended questions about the story might include:

'I wonder why William thought he'd seen a bear under the stairs? Why did he think it was a bear?'

(Prompt if necessary with: 'What did he really see under the stairs? Why did he think it was a bear?')

'Why did William decide to give the bear some food?'

(Prompt if necessary with: 'What did he think a hungry bear could do?')

'What was the bear doing in William's dream?'

'Why was there a bad smell coming from under the stairs?'

Helen Cooper, *The Bear Under the Stairs* (2008) © Picture Corgi of Random House. Used with kind permission.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Dialogic book talk activity

Why? To acknowledge and extend children's experiences and develop their vocabulary

First example of dialogic book talk: *The Bear Under the Stairs*.

3. Relate the story to the children's experiences.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- contributes to discussion
- relates the story content to their own experience
- develops their own ideas.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- sharing experiences
- gaining insight into the feelings of others
- learning to interpret the behaviour of others
- listening to and empathising with others
- developing the ability to converse with peers and adults.

Enabling Environments

The Bear Under the Stairs lends itself to acknowledgement and discussion of children's own fears and worries, in the reassuring context of William overcoming his fear of the imagined bear.

Prompts might include:

I wonder if you're scared of bears, like William?

This in itself might be enough to start children volunteering what they are (or what they used to be) scared of, and whether or not these fears are real or imaginary.

If not, a useful strategy to encourage children to volunteer their own fears is to relate to your own childhood, for example:

'When I was little, I was scared of...'

It is important to end this discussion on a reassuring note (*'Like William, we can learn there's really nothing to be scared of.'*)

Helen Cooper, *The Bear Under the Stairs* (2008) © Picture Corgi of Random House. Used with kind permission.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Dialogic book talk activity

Why? To acknowledge and extend children's experiences and develop their vocabulary
First example of dialogic book talk: *The Bear Under the Stairs*

4. Extend the children's vocabulary.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- contributes to discussion
- relates the story content to their own experience
- develops their own ideas.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication:

- sharing experiences
- gaining insight into the feelings of others
- learning to interpret the behaviour of others
- listening to and empathising with others
- developing the ability to converse with peers and adults.

Enabling Environments

The Bear Under the Stairs is rich in verbs
(e.g. scared, worried, wondered, noticed, slammed, threw).

It also contains some nouns that children might not know
(e.g. lair, hazelnuts, haddock).

You can also use it to explore children's understanding of 'under' and 'near'.

Helen Cooper, *The Bear Under the Stairs* (2008) © Picture Corgi of Random House. Used with kind permission.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Dialogic book talk activity

Why? To acknowledge and extend children's experiences and develop their vocabulary

First example of dialogic book talk: *The Bear Under the Stairs*.

5. Design follow-up activities to consolidate new vocabulary.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- contributes to discussion
- relates the story content to their own experience
- develops their own ideas.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- sharing experiences
- gaining insight into the feelings of others
- learning to interpret the behaviour of others
- listening to and empathising with others
- developing the ability to converse with peers and adults.

Enabling Environments

Consolidate understanding and use of some of the vocabulary introduced in the book:

Go on a 'noticing' walk in the setting's garden or nearby park.

Get children to tell what they notice during the walk
(e.g. a bird singing, a worm in the mud, a pretty flower, a police siren).
Talk about what each child notices.

Set up a game of 'under and over' with spoken instructions.

For example, 'crawl under the bench', 'step over the stick', 'jump over the cushion', 'wriggle under the blanket'.

Helen Cooper, *The Bear Under the Stairs* (2008) © Picture Corgi of Random House. Used with kind permission.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Dialogic book talk activity

Why? To acknowledge and extend children's experiences and develop their vocabulary
Second example of dialogic book talk: *Giraffes Can't Dance*.

1. Prepare!

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- contributes to discussion
- relates the story content to their own experience
- develops their own ideas.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- sharing experiences
- gaining insight into the feelings of others
- learning to interpret the behaviour of others
- listening to and empathising with others
- developing the ability to converse with peers and adults.

Enabling Environments

Giraffes Can't Dance is an example of a book with more written text than you are likely to be able to read in a single session: this does not matter! The important thing is to use the book to stimulate talk.

Your pre-session preparation is the same whatever length of book you choose:

- Make sure you are very familiar with the story.
- Think about the kinds of questions and prompts you will use to encourage children to think and talk about the story.
- Remember the golden rules: ask open-ended questions; recast and expand what children say.
- Think about the ways in which children might be able to relate the story to their own lives.
- Think about the new vocabulary that you will introduce in reading and talking about the story.
- Think about follow-up activities to consolidate this vocabulary.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Dialogic book talk activity

Why? To acknowledge and extend children's experiences and develop their vocabulary
Second example of dialogic book talk: *Giraffes Can't Dance*.

2. Ask open-ended questions about the story.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- contributes to discussion
- relates the story content to their own experience
- develops their own ideas.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- sharing experiences
- gaining insight into the feelings of others
- learning to interpret the behaviour of others
- listening to and empathising with others
- developing the ability to converse with peers and adults.

Enabling Environments

Giraffes Can't Dance tells the story of Gerald the giraffe, and how the other animals laughed at his dancing. As Gerald sadly notices how beautiful the moon is, a cricket encourages him to dance to the tune of the moon. All the animals admire his dancing.

Open-ended questions arising during the reading might include:

- 'Why couldn't Gerald run around very well?'
- 'Why did Gerald feel sad at the start of the Jungle Dance?'
- 'What happened when it was Gerald's turn to dance?'
- 'Which bit of Gerald's moon dance do you like best?'
- 'How did the other animals feel when they saw Gerald's moon dance?'

Giles Andreae and Guy Parker-Rees, *Giraffes Can't Dance* (2001) © Purple Enterprises Limited. Used with kind permission.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Dialogic book talk activity

Why? To acknowledge and extend children's experiences and develop their vocabulary

Second example of dialogic book talk: *Giraffes Can't Dance*.

3. Relate the story to the children's experiences.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- contributes to discussion
- relates the story content to their own experience
- develops their own ideas.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- sharing experiences
- gaining insight into the feelings of others
- learning to interpret the behaviour of others
- listening to and empathising with others
- developing the ability to converse with peers and adults.

Enabling Environments

Giraffes Can't Dance lends itself to acknowledgement of feelings of difference and of being left out, and to discussion of ways of behaving that show we value each individual. It also lends itself to discussion of music and dancing, which might lead in to family festivities and parties.

Prompts might include:

'The other animals were not very kind to Gerald at first, were they? What would you have done to make him feel happier?'

'What do you do when people are unkind to you?'

'The animals really enjoyed dancing, didn't they? When do you dance?'

'Who do you dance with?'

'How did you learn to dance?'

'I wonder if your mummy would let you dance to the tune of the moon, like Gerald – what do you think?'

Giles Andreae and Guy Parker-Rees, *Giraffes Can't Dance* (2001) © Purple Enterprises Limited. Used with kind permission.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Dialogic book talk activity

Why? To acknowledge and extend children's experiences and develop their vocabulary
Second example of dialogic book talk: *Giraffes Can't Dance*.

4. Extend the children's vocabulary.

A Unique Child

who is valued and listened to:

- contributes to discussion
- relates the story content to their own experience
- develops their own ideas.

Positive Relationships

that build and support communication by:

- sharing experiences
- gaining insight into the feelings of others
- learning to interpret the behaviour of others
- listening to and empathising with others
- developing the ability to converse with peers and adults.

Enabling Environments

Giraffes Can't Dance introduces and illustrates names of wild animals
(e.g. giraffe, warthogs, lions, rhinos, chimps, baboons, cricket)
and names of different dances
(e.g. waltzing, rock'n'roll, tango, cha-cha, Scottish reel).

It is also rich in adjectives
(e.g. long, slim, bandy, thin, elegant, bold, splendid, clumsy, silly, sad, alone, beautiful, swaying, lovely, amazing, wonderful)
and unusual verbs
(e.g. munching, buckled, prance, froze up, crept, whispered, coughed, imagine, shuffling, swishing, boogied, entranced)
Explore the children's understanding of these: you could mime the actions or ask the children to mime them.

Giles Andreae and Guy Parker-Rees, *Giraffes Can't Dance* (2001) © Purple Enterprises Limited. Used with kind permission.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Dialogic book talk activity

Why? To acknowledge and extend children's experiences and develop their vocabulary
Second example of dialogic book talk: *Giraffes Can't Dance*

5. Design follow-up activities to consolidate new vocabulary.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- contributes to discussion
- relates the story content to their own experience
- develops their own ideas.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication:

- sharing experiences
- gaining insight into the feelings of others
- learning to interpret the behaviour of others
- listening to and empathising with others
- developing the ability to converse with peers and adults.

Enabling Environments

Set up a Jungle Dance game.

Help the children to make masks of the wild animals in the story.
During this activity, repeatedly use the animal names and encourage the children to name the masks.
Encourage the children to dress up in the masks and try out (under your expert guidance!) the different dances in the story.
Keep referring to the dances by name, and encourage the children to guess which dances other children are performing, so that they too have to use the names.

Play an adjective and verb game (prompt the children with your own demonstration if necessary):

‘Show me how you look when you’re tall.’ (Demonstrate by drawing yourself up to your full height.)
‘Let’s do some swaying.’ ‘Now let’s do some shuffling.’ ‘Can we do some prancing?’ ‘And some munching?’
‘Show me your sad face.’ ‘Show me what being clumsy looks like.’ ‘Show me what being silly looks like.’

Giles Andreae and Guy Parker-Rees, *Giraffes Can't Dance* (2001) © Purple Enterprises Limited. Used with kind permission.

Planning sessions for parents with their children

This section of the guidance offers some ideas and activities which will assist you in providing sessions for children and parents together, to help support language development both in the home and in the setting. This type of session will provide you with very special opportunities to talk about a child's language development with parents – mothers as well as fathers. The information that you gain from the sessions will give you a much better insight into the child's developing language abilities. You can use the sessions to illustrate the sorts of communicative behaviours which you have been adopting within the setting, and also to talk about how the children have been learning and benefiting from the Every Child a Talker (ECAT) programme. It is a time for you to talk to parents and carers about how they can use similar approaches and do the same sorts of activities at home to extend and build upon their child's learning.

Which parents, which children?

Think first about which parents and children you want to invite to a session. Activities on offer in the session will depend to some extent on the age of the children, so it might be sensible to start with parents of children in certain age groups.

The materials that follow provide information about the typical language and communication behaviours of babies and children in four age groups: young babies up to about 6 months, older babies between about 6 and 18 months, toddlers between about 18 and 30 months, and children older than 30 months. These age groupings reflect the changing language abilities and needs of children as they develop.

You will also find some suggested activities that provide opportunities for interacting with babies and children in each age group in ways that will promote the development of their language and communication.

Over time, you will want to make sure that parents of all children are invited to sessions appropriate to them and their children.



What kind of session, and when?

You want the session to be fun, to draw parents and carers in and help further develop the positive relationships between setting staff and families. Think about what would be ‘fun’ for the families you are inviting. Which of these ‘fun’ sessions are you best able or most confident to put on?

When would be the best time to hold the session? That is, when would the families you’re inviting be most likely to be able to take part: during the day, in the evening, or at the weekend?

As well as being fun and good for relationships, the session will be designed to help parents develop their ability to communicate with their children in other contexts, in ways that encourage and stimulate language development.

Suggestions as to how you might organise the sessions are given in the activities outlined on the four activity pages which follow. These pages give information and suggestions for interacting with children in the four age groups outlined above.

Whoever the session is for, and whenever it takes place, make sure there are enough practitioners available to support the session and also to support the various language needs of the different families; this is a golden opportunity to get to know your families really well. Make sure that every practitioner present understands the importance of being positive, supportive, encouraging and non-judgemental in all their interactions with families.

Make sure everyone is comfortable

Provide a comfortable environment: comfortable chairs, refreshments for children and parents, opportunities to chat with each other and with you about their lives – their children, football, the cold wet weather – any and every day-to-day conversation. You must take into account how you will make the sessions inclusive, particularly for parents whose first language is not English. You will need to consider how you will make the sessions accessible to them, for example, by providing information in other languages. Make sure there are lots of suitable playthings for the children, and organise these so that children can play within sight and sound of their parents.

When everyone is at ease, introduce the child development element of the session. You want the families to take away certain important ideas from the session. These are given on the activity page for each age group, under ‘Learning and Development’, ‘A Unique Child’ and ‘Positive Relationships’.

And with fathers in mind...

You may already have noticed that fathers in your community are taking much more responsibility for their children’s care than previously. According to research published by the Equal Opportunities Commission, they now do one third of parental childcare in dual income families. So it is vitally important that the sessions you provide for parents don’t just appeal to mothers but also take into account the particular needs of fathers.

Research has shown that the early involvement of fathers has important long-term benefits, but unfortunately early years settings are not always the most hospitable and welcoming of places for fathers. This may be because the workforce is almost entirely female, and staff may feel apprehensive about engaging fathers. Another reason might be that fathers cannot attend quite simply because they are working during the session times. Or perhaps they are less willing to come forward to take an active role in the life of the early years setting. Whatever the reason, there is much that you can do to make sure that what you offer for parents is inviting to fathers as well as mothers.

First of all, you can make the invitations directly to fathers, by personally addressing a letter, or by phone, or better still, in person. Make sure that you have the correct contact details for fathers. Then, when they arrive, make a special point of greeting them and making them feel welcome. Look around your environment – are there positive role models in pictures and books that show dads and children?

At a practical level, have you designated toilet facilities for men? If your setting only has one adult toilet, then designate it as unisex. Make sure that dads can easily access the baby-changing facilities as well. During the sessions, think about the games that dads will enjoy playing with their children, such as football and playing cards – these are great ways to get talking. Take stock of the dressing-up clothes in your role-play area and consider whether there are things that dads will appreciate, such as football strips and superhero outfits. Remember that bringing dads in does require some extra thought and forward planning but the consequences will be of real benefit to the children.



A session for families with young babies (up to about 6 months)

These are likely to be the families most in need of pampering – sleepless nights take their toll! If they are new to parenting, they are also likely to be especially in need of reassurance that they are doing a good job, and you can provide this reassurance by talking about their baby with them.

You might decide to stimulate discussion that elicits the ideas presented under 'Learning and Development', 'A Unique Child' and 'Positive Relationships' for this age group by showing video clips of interactions between young babies and their carers. Video clips have the advantage of allowing you to pause the action at any point, which makes it easier to encourage the group to examine questions such as the following:

- What did the baby do? Does your baby do that?
- How did the adult respond to the baby? Do you do that? What else do you do?
- How did the adult know what the baby wanted/felt like? What clues does your baby give you?
- Why did the adult talk to the baby? Do you talk to your baby?
- Can babies understand when we talk to them? (*Not at first, but if we don't talk to them they never will!*)
- If they can't understand, why do we talk to them? (*To develop turn-taking and eye contact, and to provide examples of speech sounds and intonation patterns for the baby to absorb.*)
- What helps a baby understand when we talk to them? (*Talking about what they're looking at/doing/playing with at that moment.*)

This session will take place while parents are holding their babies or are in close proximity to and contact with them. This offers opportunities, if you feel this is appropriate, to comment positively on parent-child interactions as they occur, offering reassurance and support in a non-patronising way.

Finish the session with a general discussion about learning to follow your baby's lead, learning to interpret your baby's behaviour and intentions, and finding time to play, have fun with and talk to your baby.

A session for families with older babies (about 6–18 months)

Again, you can use video clips showing babies of this age interacting with objects and people to stimulate discussion that elicits the ideas presented under ‘Learning and Development’, ‘A Unique Child’ and ‘Positive Relationships’ for this age group. Practitioners might each volunteer to engage in play with a child while families watch the interaction. However you decide to stimulate discussion, encourage the group to examine questions such as:

- What did the child do to get the adult’s attention? How does your child engage your attention?
- How did the adult get the child to attend to what they were doing? What do you do to engage your child’s attention in what you’re doing?
- What do you think the child meant when they said ‘da’? How easy is it to work out what your child means? How do you do this – do you look at what they’re doing/looking at, and guess? How do you know if your guess is right or wrong? What do you do if it’s wrong?
- If your child says ‘da’ and you think they mean ‘dog’, what do you say? (*Yes, it’s a dog! Dog.*) What are you doing for the child when you say that? (*Showing the child that you understand them, valuing their attempts to communicate with you, modelling the word for them.*)

Keep this short and expect it to be punctuated by children seeking and gaining the attention of their parents in various ways. Use these interruptions positively: comment on what the child is doing, and how well the adult responds. You might also use interruptions to discuss how we feel when we are engaged in something else and our children seek to engage our attention, and how to deal with feelings of frustration and irritation at being interrupted!

Follow this with a parent-child play session, using the toys and books you have provided. Ask the parents to join in with what their child is currently doing, and talk together about the child’s current object of attention. During the play session, staff can join in with a family group and model talk that names and comments on the object the child is attending to, attempts to interpret what the child is trying to say and provides a commentary on what the child is doing. The golden rule for play is: follow the child’s lead and make it fun. When the child begins to tire, don’t try to sustain their attention but allow them to choose and explore other objects.

A session for families with toddlers (about 18–30 months)

It would be helpful in this session to have available video clips you made earlier of children and adults in the setting engaging in activities that are normally available, encouraging children to talk during these activities and responding to what children say by recasting and expanding the children’s utterances. You should also have clips of practitioners narrating the child’s activity (e.g. *You’re filling the bucket with sand. And now you’re trying to turn it over – Oh! The sand fell out.*) You can then use these clips to stimulate discussion to elicit the ideas presented under ‘Learning and Development’, ‘A Unique Child’ and ‘Positive Relationships’ for this age group.

Start by watching and discussing some of the video clips while the children play close by (or watch with their parents, if they want to). Encourage the group to examine the following:

- What was the child interested in or doing during a clip? How does the adult know that was the object of interest?
- How did the adult value what the child was interested in or doing? (*By asking questions about it; by providing a running commentary on it.*)
- How do you show your child that what they’re doing is important and interesting to you?
- What kinds of questions did the adult ask? (*‘How’ questions and ‘Why’ questions, which encourage more than a one-word response; ‘What’, ‘Where’ and ‘Who’ questions, which encourage naming responses.*)

- What kinds of questions do you use with your child?
- If a child answered with a single word, what did the adult do? (*Acknowledged the child's response; built on this by expanding it into a phrase or sentence.*)
- How did the adult encourage all the children to participate in the activity? And in the conversation?

You can end the session by encouraging families to join in with their children in some of the activities they've just watched, and practise talking with their children in the ways you've just discussed.



A session for families with older children (about 30 months and above)

This session is probably one of the easiest, because now you can organise for family group activities, taking account of the context of the families and communities with whom you work. You could hold a cooking party, where families make biscuits or cakes (perhaps to be shared and eaten later). You could hold a construction party, where families make junk models of dinosaurs, or castles, or robots. You could have a games evening, where families play simple board games or do jigsaws together. Use the seasons of the year to support outdoor activities so, for example, in the autumn you can collect leaves and talk about what you are doing and the different shapes and colours of the leaves. Any joint activity that offers rich opportunities for verbal communication will do. If this is the first time you have organised sessions like this, you might decide to videotape some of the interactions that take place, to use to stimulate discussion in subsequent sessions.

You can build in to the group activities most of the ideas presented under 'Learning and Development', 'A Unique Child' and 'Positive Relationships' for this age group. For example, if you provide a choice of recipes and ingredients, the cooking activity offers opportunities for the family to discuss what they would like to make, what they need to make it, what they need to do first, and so on. It also offers opportunities for parents to comment on what is happening (*You're stirring up the mixture*) and, while the resulting cakes or biscuits are cooking in the oven, opportunities to encourage the child to describe how they made them.

Once cooking is complete, junk models finished and games won or lost, bring the families together to talk about what they enjoyed about participating in the activities, and about how they feel the activity and accompanying conversation might have been helpful to their child's language development. You will need to have collected examples of particularly fruitful interchanges to bring in to these discussions, to reinforce what you want parents to take away with them. The discussion should end with parents being encouraged to think about how they can foster their child's language development by bringing conversation into the normal daily routines of the family.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Young babies

Babies communicate from birth. They use many different ways to communicate their wishes and interests, for example, sounds, gestures, facial expressions and body movements.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- maintains eye contact
- follows another's gazes
- develops the ability to focus on different people and objects.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- watching and listening
- responding to the baby's early attempts at communicating
- using facial expressions, gestures and touch.

Enabling Environments

Parents and carers respond to signals and communications by watching and listening when the baby is awake. Talk to your baby and interpret their signals. When your baby cries, interpret their behaviour, saying: 'Oh, you must be hungry' and link what you do with a description, saying 'Let's get you some milk'.

Early interaction depends on following the baby's lead.
This means talking about the object, person or action your baby is currently attending to.
This helps your baby begin to understand that language is used for communication.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Older babies

During this stage, babies learn to understand and say single words to communicate their needs and wishes, and begin to understand the language that is addressed to them.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- follows the adult's lead in attending to objects
- understands their first words
- says their first words
- begins to play with language
- enjoys using sounds and words to gain and sustain attention from others.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- parents and carers supporting children's first attempts to use words
- patiently listening and watching to interpret the child's meaning
- understanding that words are 'caught not taught'.

Enabling Environments with available adults

Provide children with many opportunities to explore and talk about objects.

These can be toys or safe-to-handle household objects.
You can also use books to play with your baby. Start with cloth books, and by about the age of 9 months your baby might prefer board books.

Sit with your baby in a quiet comfortable space.

Make sure your baby is not tired or hungry: it is important to get their interest and attention.

Turn the pages one at time, stopping to comment on the pictures.

Let your baby hold the book and turn the pages if they wish.
Babies have short attention spans so stop when the baby begins to get restless.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Toddlers

During this stage, vocabulary increases by leaps and bounds and children begin to combine words to make sentences describing their experiences and feelings.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- provides descriptions of their views of events
- provides explanations of links between events
- retells stories
- develops language to support links between events
- begins to understand the needs of listeners.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- valuing your child's interests and choices
- showing you love and enjoy being together
- developing their ideas and giving explanations.

Enabling Environments

Adults help children connect words with objects and actions by talking through what is happening. You can support your child's language by describing what you do as you carry out your daily routines, for example, washing up, making dinner, tidying up. You can also plan with your child, for example: 'What are you going to wear today? Let's wear your blue dress and your stripy trainers' (as you pick up these articles).

You can narrate what your child is doing as they play, for example: 'You're pushing the red car on the carpet. Make it go fast!' You can share simple story and picture books with your child. Choose a book that matches your child's interests. Settle down in a comfortable place and take time reading the story and talking about the pictures. Encourage your child to contribute to the conversation by asking questions like: 'I wonder why...' and 'What will happen next?' - questions that encourage your child to talk.

Learning and Development

Creating the language-learning environment – Children from about 30 months

Now your child is becoming independent and using language to ask lots of questions.
Most children will be trying to speak in sentences but these may not sound like adult sentences.

A Unique Child who is valued and listened to:

- provides descriptions of their views of events
- provides explanations of links between events
- retells stories
- develops language to support links between events
- begins to understand the needs of listeners.

Positive Relationships that build and support communication by:

- valuing your child's interests and choices
- showing you love and enjoy beginning together
- developing their ideas and giving explanations
- answering their questions time and time again.

Enabling Environments

Make the most of opportunities to chat with your child – in the car, walking to the park or at the meal table.

At this age children begin to play cooperative games. Games provide a wonderful opportunity for developing language. Games that children this age enjoy include the shopping list game; picture cards of food items are placed upside down and you take turns to pick a card. If the picture matches one on your illustrated shopping list, you keep it. The first one to get all the items on their list wins. Several variants of this game can be made up, developing vocabulary in different areas.

Children also enjoy simple board games, which help develop vocabulary and turn-taking. Sharing books together can be a source of much enjoyment. Let your child choose a book, either at home or in the library. Be prepared to read the same favourite book over and over again. When you are sharing the book, draw links to your child's own experiences and feelings. For example, when reading *Not Now, Bernard* you can laugh about the ways in which parents may seem too busy to listen to their children.

Acknowledgements

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