



Photograph by Bonnie Neugebauer

Children's Conversations: Why Are They Important?

by Dennie Palmer Wolf

Because adults have more facts, words, and grammatical rules, we often assume that it is teachers and parents who teach children how to talk.

But stand in the doorway of any room in any child care center and you instantly notice how much of the talking, whispering, chanting, yelling, and teasing flows back and forth between children.

Child-to-child talk may not be as elegant or as smooth running as adult-child conversations. But because it takes place between (more or less) equal partners who have a stake in the ongoing activity, peer conversations may teach children some very special language lessons. In the last months, we have been listening in on children's conversations in order to collect some illustrations.

The Basics

Part of being a good conversationalist is knowing about turns. As they talk to one another, children are learning the fundamental rules of conversation: listening, turn taking, keeping to the same topic. Here Lyle tries to teach his friend Larry a basic rule about listening.

Lyle and Larry are near the cubbies, struggling with their coats before going outside.

Lyle: You got my mittens?

Larry goes on fumbling in his cubby.

Lyle: (Speaking more loudly.) Do you got my mittens?

Larry is still hunting for something.

Lyle: (Puts his hand on Larry's arm and walks around to look at Larry.) I need my mittens. You got them?

Larry: Huh?

Lyle: Listen, mittens, mittens. Look for my mittens.

Saying What You Mean

Given time and peace of mind, a parent or teacher who sees a two year old point and say "Dat!" will generously

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recognize that the child wants the bin of beads up on the shelf. But peers may not do so much interpreting. By demanding messages clear enough to be understood, they may help each other learn to be explicit in their talk.

Lisa: *I need that back. (She points to her marker which rolled away down the table.)*

Hsuan: *What?*

Lisa: *Gimme that. (She points down the table again.)*

Hsuan hands Lisa a piece of paper from a stack several inches down the table.

Lisa: *No, that. (She reaches toward the marker.)*

Hsuan: *This? (She holds up the marker.)*

Lisa nods.

Hsuan: *Say the marker.*

Joining In

From observing their friends, children also may pick up ways to use words to join a group effectively. These skills are subtle. They include knowing how to locate a



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likely *break* in the flow of action, picking up clues about the topic, realizing what would add to that topic, learning to join in rather than ask if you can play. Any child who watched Lani carefully could learn just these kinds of skills.

Lani comes in late in the morning. Already there is a group of children playing restaurant in the house corner. For a while she hangs at the edges of the group, watching.

Wilson: *We're makin' food for when the truck drivers come.*

Max: *(Roars by on a wagon.) Gimme some dinner quick.*

Wilson: *(Stuffs a plate and a cup into a plastic bag and pushes it through the house window to Max.)*

Lani still watches.

Wilson: *(Goes back to his pretend cooking.) Hope no more trucks come too soon.*

Lani: *Hi, I'm the truck watcher. I live on the road. I call you up when the trucks are coming.*

Wilson looks up, surprised.

Lani: *Tell me your number.*

Wilson: *987663210.*

Getting Ideas Accepted

It takes a great deal of skill to *make yourself heard* in a group of peers. From listening to other more skilled or slightly older peers, children pick up a number of *tricks of the trade* such as attention-getting devices, ways to build on what other children say, ways to use words to convince and persuade. Ben is a master at this kind of group talk.

Ben, Marc, and Paul are outside in the play yard. They are trying to decide what to play.

Paul: *I think robbers.*

Marc: *Naw, we do that all the days. He-man, let's do He-man.*

Paul: *No, just one can be He-man.*

Ben: *That's right. Robbers is a good idea! We could bury the stuff we get.*

Paul: *No. . . .*



Ben: Yes, really. Like this. In the sandbox. See? (He stoops down and digs a small hole and smoothes it over again.) See?

Paul: He-man's better.

Ben: Want to be a He-man robber?

Paul: No, there isn't one.

Ben: Pretend that there was.

Paul: No, it's not true.

Ben: You don't know, maybe there is. We could fake it.

Resolving Conflicts

When children talk with each other, arguments and disagreements can arise. Since children care mightily about the outcomes, they have a big investment in learning to master the in's and out's of argument, teasing, and face saving.

Michael comes in from outside, covered with mud.

Steven: You're gross.

Michael: I am not gross.

Steven: You are too.

Michael: (Getting annoyed.) You're gross.

Steven: Am not!

Michael: Then I'm not.

Steven: But you're dirty.

Michael: Yeah, not gross. Gross is pigs, not me.

Steven: Yeah, gross is pigs.

Learning Types of Talk

As they eavesdrop on one another, children teach each other how to use words differently in different situations. For instance, by tagging after Pamela, a good listener could figure out some important differences between the kind of immediate and situation-dependent talking which works well when playing at the water table and the more self-contained or story-like language which works when a person wants to tell about an experience.

Pamela leans over the edge of the water table, splashing with her fingertips. Shane stands on the other side of the table.

Pamela: (Points to a funnel.) Hand me that.

Shane: (Flicks the funnel over.) Here.

Pamela: Like boat. Brmmmmmm. Brmmmmmm. (She pushes it through the water.)

Shane: Lift it up.

Pamela: (Lifts the funnel out and water trickles out the spout.) Hey, the gas, the gas is running out. (She drops the funnel.) Splat, splat, sink you old gassy boat.

A little later, Pamela and Shane are leaning on the edge of the water table.

Pamela: My grandmother buyed me a present.

Shane: Yeah? What?

Pamela: The other month she came and picked me up in her car . . . her green car with the seat belts . . . And she said we could go shopping up to Zayres . . . and we got there, up to Zayres . . . and we went inside . . . and she said to look around for something good . . . not candy . . . and I saw this purse . . . it's kind of pink with this closing thing and a strap . . . it was near to my birthday . . . and she said I could buy it. So she gived me the dollar and I gived it to the lady . . . that's so.

Talking with friends provides one of the most powerful contexts for language learning. In fact, many researchers and practitioners have found that child-to-child conversation is perhaps the most effective situation in which to help children make major language gains. Bilingual programs have gathered evidence that *peer tutoring* is probably the fastest and most motivating way to teach a young child a second language.

Research on blind children is coming up with similar results. Elaine Anderson of University of Southern California has found that sighted siblings make important contributions to their younger, blind brothers' and sisters' language development. It is in interactions with their brothers and sisters, more than with adults, that blind children learn basic conversational skills (such as conflict negotiation and bids to join play). Brothers and sisters also help blind children to move beyond some of the odd forms, which blind youngsters sometimes develop (such as being overly repetitious or confusing *I* and *you*). Clearly, in ordinary and in extraordinary circumstances, child-to-child conversations count in language learning.

