



Confident COMMUNICATORS

Hilary White introduces a selection of imaginative ways to foster speaking, listening and understanding in your children...

Speaking, listening and understanding are central to every aspect of our lives. From expressing our needs to learning how the world works, we depend on our ability to listen, communicate and make sense of our social and material environment. So how we can support young children's development in these areas?

■ **Creating an environment for conversation** Past studies indicate that the conversational environment in the early years setting tends not to be as rich as that of the home. This is not surprising, given that early years practitioners work with several children at a time and don't have intimate knowledge of a child, compared with a parent. It is, however, useful to be aware of these considerations, as they can help us to create the best possible language opportunities for our children.

■ **Get to know the child** 'Being understood' helps children to develop

confidence as communicators. With young children, it's much easier to make sense of what they are saying and respond meaningfully if you have some background knowledge of their lives. Without being inappropriately nosy, make links with parents and find out about each child's experiences, interests and recent life events.

■ **Time to talk** In the busy environment of the early years setting, it's easy to forget the value of simply talking. Try to prioritise conversational opportunities and pick up on ad hoc explorations of concepts, events, words and stories – particularly during unstructured moments in the day. Following up the child's questions and comments often leads to the richest conversations – and it's also useful to ask voluntary helpers to focus on simply chatting with the children.

■ **Modelling listening** Listening is an integral part of conversation, and the ability to listen is every bit as important as the ability to speak. Show children how to

listen by listening carefully yourself. As much as possible, give a child your undivided attention – and if you can't listen at a particular moment, explain why and promise that you will listen to what they have to say later.

■ **Listening during group activities**

During group activities, emphasise the importance of listening when somebody is speaking. If a child is losing their audience, help them to finish off what they are saying. Always keep in mind the importance of making adult-directed activities engaging for the children, and be aware of children starting to lose interest. Although it's important to encourage children to be attentive, we can only expect so much. The best way of helping children's listening skills is to show them that listening is worth their while.

■ **Scaffolding understanding**

'Understanding' is integral to speaking and listening. The Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky believed that children create themselves as thinkers through language, and that the role of the 'more experienced other' is significant in helping children to move forward in their thinking. Jerome Bruner built on Vygotsky's work, using the term 'scaffolding' to describe how adults support children learning at a pace and level that is right for them. Learning is essentially a social process, and we have a vital role to play in helping young children discover and engage with their natural, social and cultural environments through language.

■ **Give it a go!** In line with the theory of scaffolding, Bruner believed that it is possible to explore any concept with a child – as long as it is pitched at an appropriate level for that child's stage of development (see Bruner's *The Process of Education*). This poses an exciting challenge for the early years practitioner! Try to be open to your children's curiosity – and if you don't know the answer to a question, that needn't stop you from engaging in an interesting conversation. Aim to check out the question later on, and plan how to present your response in terms that the child can understand. The more you practise doing this, the easier (and more fun) it becomes – and you will also build up a repertoire of 'interesting answers'.

Activity ideas

It's important that the creative and open-ended nature of language is reflected within language-based activities during the early years. The following activities are adult-initiated, but designed for children to develop in their own way...

The 'Question King and Queen'

Ask the children to help you create a throne and a crown. Add question mark symbols to the crown and explain their meaning to the children. Let the children take it in turns to be the Question King or Queen and sit on the throne wearing the crown. Build a back story for the children; the Question King/Queen is very haughty and will only answer questions when they are seated on their throne. Model asking simple questions to start off with: What's your name? What's your favourite food? As the children get the idea, allow them a free rein with their questions - and give them time to develop extended conversation, if they wish.

EYFS:

This activity fosters *"children's enjoyment of spoken ... language by providing interesting and stimulating play opportunities"* (Speaking/Enabling Environments). It also encourages children to use *"a variety of questions, e.g. what, where, who"* (Speaking/22-36 months). Playing the role of the Question King or Queen encourages children to *"answer 'how' and 'why' questions about their experiences ..."* (Understanding/ELG).



Tea and chat

Set up a café table with a tablecloth, flowers, cups, plates and so on. Provide appropriate drinks in a teapot and healthy snacks. Print cards with an invitation for tea and a chat; for example, *Dear..., please come for tea and a chat, love from...* Help the children to fill in invitations to give to one or two friends. Make sure that every child who wants to participate gets the chance to invite or be invited. Model the process of hosting a tea party and chatting to guests, and encourage the children to linger and converse over their drinks and snacks.

EYFS:

With its focus on conversation, this activity enables children to hold a *"conversation, jumping from topic to topic"* (Speaking/22-36 months). When you join in, it also enables you to *"follow the child's lead to talk about what they are interested in"* and *"help children expand on what they say, introducing and reinforcing the use of more complex sentences"* (Speaking/Positive Relationships).



about the author

Hilary White is a former nursery and primary teacher. As an author she has written a number of books and contributed to a range of magazines.

Draw me a...

Working with two or three children, provide each child with a sheet of paper and coloured pencils. Seat yourselves so you are facing away from each other (draft in another adult to help out). Start off by asking the children to draw something - *"Please draw a pink cat"* - and draw one yourself. The next child then suggests an addition: *"Please draw blue spots on the cat."* The next child suggests another addition - *"Please draw a red bow on the cat's tail"* - and so on, until the drawings are completed. Encourage the children to be as clear as possible in their instructions and to listen carefully so they know what to draw. At the end of the session, look at all the cats, give them names and talk about them.

EYFS:

This activity requires children to *"follow directions (if not intently focused on own choice of activity)"* (Listening and Attention/30-50 months). It also requires them to maintain *"attention, concentrate and sit quietly during appropriate activity"* (Listening and Attention/40-60+ months). When introducing the activity to the children, you will have the opportunity to *"explain why it is important to pay attention when others are speaking"*. (Listening and Attention/Positive Relationships).





Teddy Sleepover

Pick a teddy for children to take home with them. Ask the children to help you create a sleepover bag for Teddy, talking about what should go in the bag. Let the children take it in turns to have Teddy for a sleepover, and the next day tell everybody what Teddy got up to. Encourage the children to listen carefully to the speaker and ask questions. Prepare a note for parents, explaining the communication and language purpose of the activity, and suggesting ways of helping their child to benefit from the activity.

EYFS:

Talking about Teddy's sleepover enables children to "retell a simple past event in correct order" (Speaking/30-50 months) and link "statements and stick to a main theme or intention" (Speaking/40-60+ months). It's also a great way of providing "opportunities for children to participate in meaningful speaking and listening activities" (Speaking/Enabling Environments) because children can talk about their own recent play experiences with Teddy.



What if...?

Think up a selection of 'What if...?' scenarios, linking them to familiar experiences and stories. For example, "What if Mrs Jenkins forgot to cook everyone's lunch today? What if the Gruffalo helped everyone with their coats at home time?" If possible, provide a picture as a starting point with the 'What if...?' question written on the back. Let the children take it in turns to pick a picture from the bag, and encourage them to talk about and act out their scenario. Display the cards for children to explore independently.

EYFS:

This activity can be included as part of planning "regular short periods when individuals listen to others..." (Listening and Attention/Enabling Environments). The discussion part of the activity encourages children to listen "to others one to one or in small groups, when conversation interests them" (Listening and Attention/30-50 months).

'One, Two, Buckle My Shoe'

Gather props to go with the 'One, Two, Buckle My Shoe' nursery rhyme - a buckled shoe, a picture of a door mounted on card, sticks, a model hen and so on. As you take each prop from the basket, encourage the children to explore and talk about it. Once all the props have been explored, act out the rhyme and then put the props in the setting for the children to use independently. Use a similar model for other favourite rhymes, stories and picture books.

EYFS:

This activity encourages interest in playing "with sounds, songs and rhymes" (Listening and Attention/22-36 months). It also enables children to "experiment with words and sounds" (Speaking/Positive Relationships). Recreating the rhyme with the props counts as a "collaborative task, for example... story-making through role-play" (Speaking/Enabling Environments).

FEELY BOXES

With the children, decorate a large lidded box. Cut two holes in the side for a child's hands to go through. Place an interesting item in the box and show the children how to put their hands into the box so they can feel the item. Encourage them to describe the item - its shape, its texture and whether they like how it feels. If necessary, prompt them by asking questions. Encourage them to talk about the item before guessing what it is. As an additional challenge, can watching children guess the item from what the 'feeler' is saying? Encourage the children to find their own items to go in the box and explore the activity independently. **EYFS:** This activity enables you to "show interest in the words children use to communicate and describe their experiences" (Speaking/Positive Relationships). Describing all aspects of the feely object helps children to build up "vocabulary that reflects the breadth of their experiences" (Speaking/30-50 months).

SURPRISE, SURPRISE!

Wrap an interesting object in pretty paper. Ask a group of children what they think might be in the parcel and encourage them to express ideas, ask questions and chat about the parcel. At an appropriate moment, let them open the parcel. Apart from triggering conversation, this is a nice way to introduce a new resource, or you can pick an item connected to a theme or story. Put out other wrapped parcels for children to explore and talk about together during free choice time. They can then be opened at the end of the session.

EYFS: This activity allows you to "model being a listener by listening to children and taking account of what they say in your response to them" (Listening and Attention/Positive Relationships). Discussing what might be in the parcel enables children to use talk to "organise, sequence and clarify thinking, ideas, feelings and events" (Speaking/40-60+ months).

