

it's good to TALK

Get your children talking with **Alistair Bryce-Clegg's** innovative activity ideas...

My children have excelled when it comes to the ability to talk. I remember with my eldest child willing the day to come when he would speak his first word, and then, after the novelty had worn off, wishing he'd come fitted with a mute button. I asked my youngest son recently why he didn't even pause for breath during his stream of conversation (which lasts from the moment he opens his eyes in the morning until he closes them again at night, and sometimes continues in his sleep!) His answer made me smile and dread the next 10 years all at the same time; he said, "The thing is, Daddy, I just have so much to say, I'm worried I won't fit it in!"

For children who are able to speak, talk is the most powerful tool that they possess. Good quality talk is the key to opening up so many opportunities, and a child's ability to talk well has a great and long-lasting

impact on their attainment. The more they talk, the better at it they get. The wider their experience of things to talk about, the bigger their range of vocabulary becomes. The more words they know, the better they are at communicating what they think and feel – which helps reduce their feelings of frustration and anxiety when they cannot find the right word or phrase to use.

Having their say

For very young children there are broadly two types of talk: 'real talk', which is based around the reality that the child lives in (where they live, who with, what they like to eat, what the weather is like, etc.). Then there's 'fantasy talk', which is not a recount of a real event but talk that's fictitious and based on imagination. Often with children, the line between the two can get blurred, and children very convincingly combine the two. I remember congratulating a parent on



Great talk comes from knowing what interests children, and providing them with well-planned activities as well as impromptu experiences

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the birth of their new baby and commenting that I hadn't realised that they were expecting. "We're not!" came the rather bemused reply. It was just that their four-year-old daughter had done an impromptu but comprehensive 'show and tell' entitled 'My Mummy went into hospital in the night and now I have a baby sister – called Grace!'

It's through fantasy talk that children really get to use and expand their imaginations, creating amazing ideas that they can store



They always play with the box!

It's a phrase that's used in homes across the world every year at Christmas and birthdays, because it's true! Children love a cardboard box, and boxes are therefore the best thing for helping children to develop their imagination and talk. If a child has a boat then it is a boat and no matter what, it will always be a boat. But when they have a box then they have endless possibilities – it can be something different for every child who touches it. Needless to say, you should make sure you have lots of boxes in your setting that children can use in their own imaginative play.



in their brain and re-use later in their academic career. It's true that you can only write what you can talk. When you write, your pencil is like your silent voice, writing rather than speaking the words. If the words are not in your head, then they can't come out of the end of your pencil. So, our job is to stuff children's heads to capacity with varied, exciting, challenging and engaging experiences.

The best talk always comes when children are talking about something that particularly

interests them, and when you provoke an emotional response from them in the stimulus you give them to talk about. Is it something that will make them happy? Sad? Excited? Apprehensive?

I find that children engage far more in a talk activity when they think they've discovered the subject matter/object for themselves, rather than when sat in a circle while an adult does a long introduction followed by a 'big reveal! Children are not going to talk if they're not interested in what

you want them to talk about! The following activities are all designed with this very much in mind.

1. The talk box

This is exactly what it says it is – a box with something in it to talk about! If I'm working with a group of children on developing talk I try and find out if there's anything that they're particularly interested in. If the contents of my talk box is based around this subject then the engagement is likely to be higher. Or, I give



For a **child** to really **understand** a word and use it in its

correct context, they may need to **hear** it many times in many **different** situations

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them something that I hope will provoke an emotional reaction, because with that sort of reaction usually comes a strength of feeling and an eagerness to share an opinion.

I once had a tiny box with a dead Bumble Bee in it, perfectly preserved. When the children first opened the box, their reaction was one of fear. Once they realised it was dead, however, that fear became fascination. Children are usually running away from bees screaming! It was very powerful for them to be able to hold one in their hand (*be careful to ensure the bee's sting is no longer present before you try this!* – Ed.) and really study it.

Some of my boxes are 'whispering boxes' where the children have to whisper about what is in it; some are 'shouting boxes' where they have to – well, you get the picture! (Shouting boxes are best suited to outdoor learning. When I use them inside I usually get some practitioner bellowing over in the biggest voice of all, "That is an outside voice, quiet voices please!" Oh, the irony!)

I've used rotten fruit, sequins, doll's house furniture, a plastic foot, photographs, old bones and even a WWII potato masher to name but a few. I've just left my boxes lying around for the children to find and then tell me as if I didn't know they were there – magic!

2 Beans means... orange feet

For this one you need your water tray or a builder's tray on the floor. Put a circle of chairs around it and then fill it with baked beans (the really cheap large catering tins). Get the children to take their shoes and socks off and put their feet into this cold, gloopy, lumpy mixture. I guarantee that will get them talking!

You can also use cooked pasta, cold porridge, semolina, tapioca, corn flour and water, mashed banana, shaving foam, mud, shampoo, slime (flax, warm water and food colouring).

3 Paint your bread

This one is not only good for talk but also for

developing fine motor skills. You'll need white bread, milk, food colouring, paintbrushes and a toaster...

■ Mix a little bit of milk with a drop of food colouring (put each colour in a separate bowl!).

■ Using the bread as a canvas, get the children to paint onto it with the coloured milk.

■ When they're finished, toast it (encourage them not to completely soak the bread as this plays havoc with the toaster!). They'll

notice that the colours will actually brighten, not dull when toasted.

■ Finally, eat it!

4 Bush tucker trial

One important early aspect of developing talk is the ability to express a preference for or against something. In its simplest sense it's children being able to say 'yes' or 'no'. Ideally, we want to expand their vocabulary so that they can explain why they do or don't like something, as well as helping





■ 'Toast' is very similar, only you ask the children to tell you what shape their slice of toast becomes after every bite.

6 Painting in the rain

Wait for a really rainy day, then put large pieces of paper outside either on the fence/wall or on your easel.

Mix some fairly thick paint in a variety of colours. Then tell the children to take off their socks and shoes because they're going to go out and paint in the rain!

Not only will they have the sensation of rain on their feet and the excitement of sloshing paint around whilst the heavens are opening, they'll also have a very real experience of colour mixing with nature doing the hard work!

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After 10 years as a consultant head of a three form entry infant school and early years unit, Alistair now works as an EYFS consultant full time. You can find out more about Alistair and his work at abcdoes.com

them to develop a range of descriptive vocabulary to allow them to accurately express what they're thinking and feeling.

Most children are motivated by food, so why not use it to get them talking? You're going to set up your own version of a 'bush tucker trial', for which the children will have to carry out a series of blind taste tests. Not only will they need to be able to identify what they've eaten, they'll also have to express their preference and give a reason why. This is a great one to do outdoors with edible plants.

5 What can you see?

This is a really simple yet effective game that I usually play with clouds or toast (random, I know, but all will become clear...). It's a good activity for getting children to be more creative in their thinking.

■ Lie on your back and look at the clouds. Tell the children what you think the cloud shapes look like and why. Ask them what they see. This activity easily builds into a story-making session using the shapes you have seen.