

making time to talk

Playfully understanding and facilitating 'the many languages of children' can have immense developmental benefits, says **Fleur Griffiths...**

Children love to have something to say to someone who cares to listen. We know that they respond to personal interest and to the story form, and enjoy engaging with grown-ups across the art forms, using their music and movement, drawing and dramas, as well as their words. Young people need listening adults who can take turns to create shared meanings, and the Talking Table is an initiative I devised in order to encourage just this kind of creative conversation – the sort that arises spontaneously when we are tuned in to children's interests, enquiries, preoccupations and anxieties, and have a shared focus of attention around a treasured object.

The idea originally grew in response to a request to help improve speaking and listening in mainstream nurseries. Staff were concerned that many children were making little imaginative use of the array of play possibilities on offer – and adults were spending precious time settling conflicts or rearranging the setting, rather than interacting playfully. During my visits, therefore, alongside the usual choices like water or sand or block play, children could choose to sit in one of four chairs round a

table where I was seated. I was soon recognisable by my blue tunic with its pockets of surprises. Parents were told of the project, and encouraged to help children bring a pocket-sized treasure to show.

I ceremoniously entered each name in my visitors' book as I welcomed every arrival. Initially, we passed our special objects round, not necessarily speaking – gradually, over the weeks, we extended the scope to include a shared paper and colours. We could, for instance, enclose our 'toys' in drawn lines and make a world for them. We could have a character – a bear in my case – visit each world in turn and be shown around. I could

describe the journey, putting words to gestures and dramatic actions (many children who would be silenced by direct questioning happily talk with a puppet). Finally, we would get to the stage when I could make the story of what had just been enacted, with children chipping in or nodding assent or objecting to my version of what happened. The joint paper was then rolled up and this marked the end, allowing new children to participate. It was left where children could retell the story to each other and to parents at home time. It was their agenda, not a teacher's lesson with learning goals pre-ordained.



findout more

The Talking Table, along with other creative atmospheres for learning, is discussed further in *Supporting Children's Creativity Through Music, Dance, Drama and Art*, edited by Fleur Griffiths (Routledge, £19.99)



What objects encourage children to talk?

- Personal treasures work best because you enjoy them and others are given the privilege of handling them – loans have more preciousness.
- Restricting the size of objects can prevent showing off with commercial toys and instead, allows children to find shells and stones and dead creatures to smuggle in.
- For learning turn-taking, means-ends toys work well: a button to press, something that winds up or spins, makes a sound, tumbles down a ladder or jumps from a box.
- Coloured pens dictate content: black so often signals bad temper and danger; blue calls up water and sky; green becomes a beanstalk or garden...
- Children love surprises so boxes, pockets, bags and parcels intrigue. There is suspense while we guess what might be rattling inside.
- Simple enclosures drawn on the paper can keep objects safe. Pieces of string, pipe-cleaners and ribbon can demark areas: homes, gardens and parks.
- Other, more symbolic things bring power and make for imaginative stories: cars, planes, trains, keys, magic wands, webs, puppets, rings and jewels, money and magnets.
- Things that can transform also convey power: magnifying glasses, tools, masks, mirrors, lumps of Plasticine or dough.
- Small stuffed toys, like teddy, prompt more altruistic control. Being the adult and caring for the little baby or young animal is the stuff of many stories.
- Certain items touch on adventure and danger, mishap and fear. With them come the comforts and solutions, the rescues and havens. Plasters and bandages bring on a stream of disaster tales! Witches, giants and monsters can appear just from the use of a black crayon, a hole in the paper, a scribble.

Round a Talking Table (or a ring of cushions on the floor, a rolled out mat, or a hoop – or even, as one school discovered, in a Talking Tent pitched outside), using our imagination, we are able to create stories from the disparate objects children bring. We create a dialogue around the different materials and use string or felt pens to make lines, enclosures, ladders and pathways, which join our concerns together. We create contexts like the seaside or the park from marks of blue or green, and so-called scribbles become danger, jelly, mud or anything else we fancy. We can use our hands to knock on imaginary doors, to jump on trampolines, climb beanstalks, or whiz down slides without leaving our seats. We can pick up play-people, teddy, Power Rangers and toy animals as the characters that converse with drawings and materials, and involve the other children round the Table as a listening audience.

This is more than the well-used 'Show and Tell' routine, although this can be a starting

point. It needs the adult to be playful yet to secure fair play; to conduct orderly 'rounds'; to join the individuals into a group, telling a shared story; to express in words the meanings that are being conveyed non-verbally, and must be listened for and read in glances and gestures. While children have the chance to initiate and lead, the grown-up is actively engaged; his/her role is to be like a more able friend who can empathise, but also challenge by introducing extensions to the learning. The direct involvement of parents is another vital ingredient, and because there is link-up between all parties – home, school and visitor – and they are all communicating and conversing, querying and celebrating, the child's world makes more sense. Being able to express what is important to you, and to feel listened to and appreciated, brings gains in confidence and a sense of well-being. There is no right or wrong answer, so the pressure to satisfy some standard is removed. It is an approach that hears the many languages of children; what makes human sense is what counts.

Feedback about the Talking Table

From teachers:

- "It takes us back to the child as the focus of attention rather than curriculum delivery. The child's agenda can be aired."
- "It is great to have the time to give better listening attention."
- "It has increased staff confidence to try a new tool."
- "It has an effect on behaviour because it recognises the need for approval and belonging. Certain attention-seeking children have calmed and sought to please."

From parents:

- "It's nice to hear what our children have been doing and saying. It is so difficult to get any idea from asking them what they did at nursery."
- "What I like is that the children are not pushed to come to the Table. They choose. The quiet ones like mine can watch and be part of the story, too."
- "I now try and look at things more from the child's point of view. I can see there is more in a line or mark on the page than I thought before."
- "I am watching and listening better and being more like a partner when we do things."