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Talking time was devised at the Institute of Education London in collaboration with schools and pupils in Tower Hamlets. The project was devised by Julie Dockrell and Morag Stuart at the Institute Of Education, London. Diane King was the senior research officer on the project.

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22/06/2007

Dear Colleague,

'Talking Time'

Helping young children become confident speakers and listeners can be challenging. To address this challenge we have designed a DVD and hand book which is bespoke to the needs of early years settings in Tower Hamlets

In collaboration with Tower Hamlets early years settings we created an evidence based resource that can support staff in developing early language skills. The materials have been tried and tested in Tower Hamlets nurseries and have been shown to be effective. They provide staff with tools to be used flexibly in contexts where, for whatever reason, children may be struggling with speaking and understanding language.

We hope you find these materials interesting and helpful. Should you wish any further support or inservice training please contact us at the Institute Of Education.

Yours truly,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Julie Dockrell'.

Professor Julie Dockrell

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'K Morag Stuart'.

Professor Morag Stuart



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TALKING TIME

Supporting language in early years settings

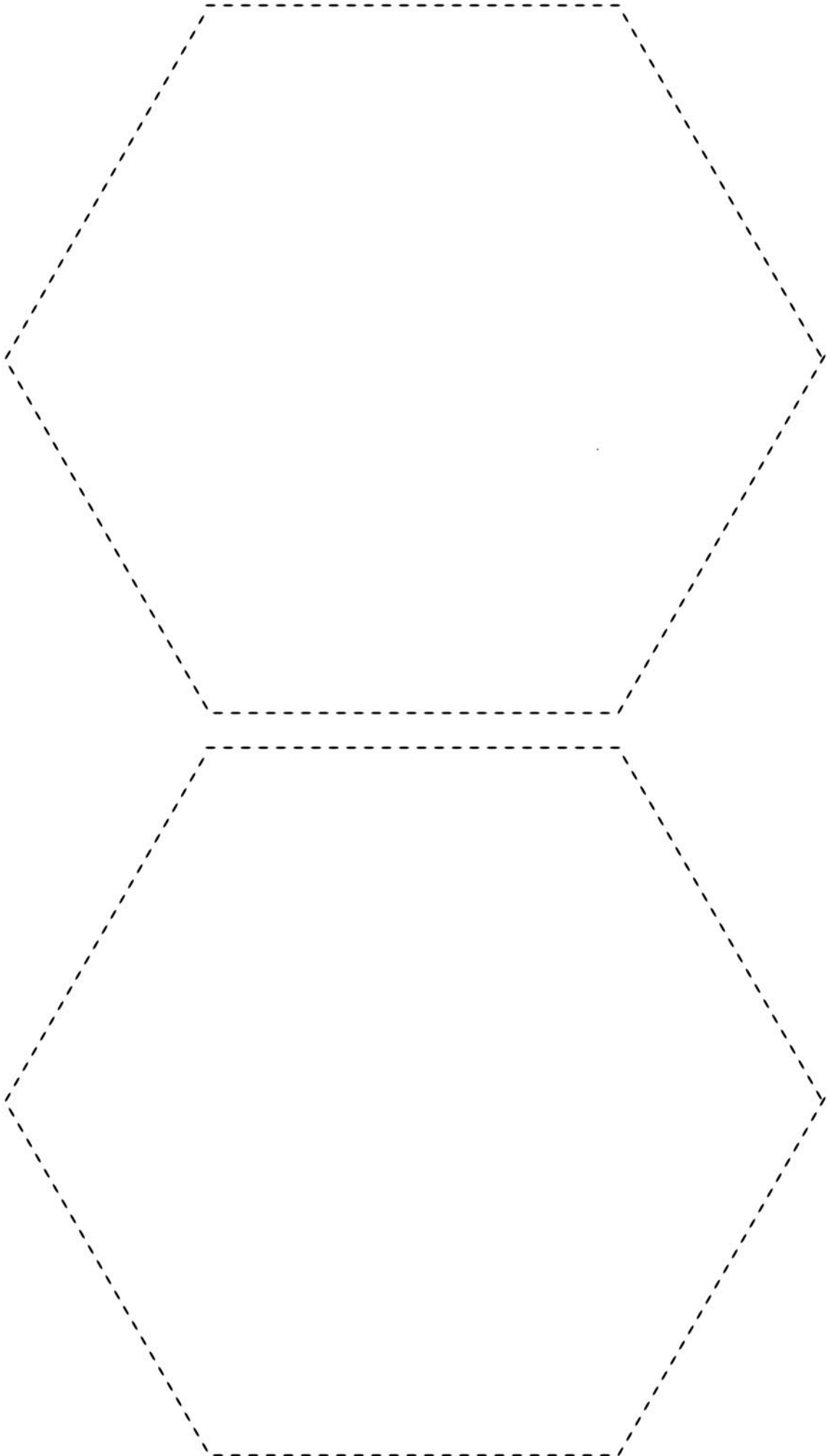
HANDBOOK AND GUIDE TO ACTIVITIES

Contents

1. Introduction to Talking Time	Page 1
2. Talking with children	Page 2
3. Acting out activity	Page 3
4. 'Teddy says' activity	Page 4
5. Story talk	Page 5
6. Hexagons	Page 12
7. Organising groups and activities	Page 16
8. ' <i>Literacy Today</i> ' Extract: 'Supporting Early Oral Language Skills'	Page 18
9. Further reading	Page 22
10. Sample Hexagon Set (Visiting the Doctor)	Page 23

Attached DVD contains a video, hexagon sets and a pdf of this handbook.

Hexagon Templates



TALKING TIME

1. Introduction

There is a growing concern about the number of children entering school without the oral language skills they need to access the curriculum. The implications of this for literacy and social and emotional development have been well documented in academic and practitioner reviews. It is therefore important that as much as possible is done in the early years to support language development and minimize language delays. It is also important that intervention programmes are adequately evaluated.



Talking Time is an interactive oral language intervention package designed to support language and to foster communicative exchanges with young children. Three key linguistic skills are targeted:

- vocabulary development,
- the ability to make inferences, and
- the ability to recount a narrative.

An evaluation of the programme in nursery schools in Tower Hamlets has shown that it is effective in improving oral language skills (Dockrell, Stuart & King, 2006)

Research Reference:

Dockrell, J.E. Stuart, M. & King D. 'Implementing effective oral language interventions in preschool settings: no simple solutions.' In Ginsbourg, J & Clegg, J. Language and Social Disadvantage. Wiley

2. Talking with Children



One of the most effective ways to help children improve oral language skills is to treat them as *conversationalists*. The way we talk with children is important and there is evidence to show that an interactive approach will foster both the child's understanding and expression of language.

In particular, it has been shown that we can help children develop oral language skills by using 'talk' which is:-

- ❖ child centred – focuses on what the child is doing or saying
- ❖ relevant and related to what the child says
- ❖ embedded in familiar routine, e.g. hanging up coats, having a snack
- ❖ supports verbal interaction between peers, e.g. redirects adult initiated interactions
- ❖ makes use of focused contrasts, e.g. 'one car', 'two cars'
- ❖ asks open questions, e.g. *Why did they do that?*
What do you think is happening?'
- ❖ expands on child utterances, e.g. 'boy fall in water'
'yes, he's fallen in the water and he's getting very wet'
- ❖ recasts sentences, e.g. 'doll broke', 'yes, the doll is broken'
- ❖ models language structures
- ❖ uses event casting, e.g. 'Now we are going to bake some biscuits.'

Talk which is not facilitative to language development should be avoided. This includes:-

- ❖ direct questions and demands, e.g. questions which will elicit a one word answer from the child
- ❖ following an inflexible script
- ❖ forcing the child to repeat what you say

3. Acting Out Activity



This activity aims to develop children's vocabulary by structuring particular activities that encourage the use of *nouns* and *verbs*. Before commencing the activity, the children should talk about what they will do and afterwards they could feedback to other children (eg at carpet time) what they have done so that they can show that they understand the words they have learned and can use them in conversation.

For each activity, there should be a set of about six target words incorporating information from the parental questionnaire. The target words should include a mixture of *nouns* (object words), *verbs* (action words) and *pronouns*. If possible, try to repeat previous target words in subsequent sessions.

The following are some suggestions but you could adapt any idea to this activity:

1. **Going on holiday:** *beach, towel, swim, pretend, I, we*
2. **Simon says ('Teddy' says):** *eye, knee, shake, show, other, your,*
3. **Painting and decorating:** *nail, room, open, like, heavy, them*
4. **Going shopping:** *chicken, shop, pick, think, those, that*
5. **Exploring in the jungle:** *tiger, sky, scared, walk, look, we*
6. **The birthday party:** *sweets, table, pour, sing, share, she*
7. **Going to the doctor:** *tummy, blanket, hurt, sleep, morning, it*

The activity can be extended by using words such as '*before*', '*after*' and '*while*'.

Props are very useful in this activity to support children's learning of vocabulary. A box of appropriate items can be kept handy for each activity. The 'holiday' box, for example, could have items such as a suitcase, swimsuits, hats, bucket and spade, sunglasses, towels, money and ice-creams. Tickets and passports could be made by the children during art activities.

4. Teddy Says



This is a different type of acting out activity. It again targets specific vocabulary but with additional prompts. Here the person leading the activity introduces the targeted nouns (in this case, parts of the body) in *picture form*. Verbs are introduced by asking the children to perform *actions*.

A useful way to begin the activity and engage the children's attention is with a *song*, such as 'heads and shoulders knees and toes'. Then show the children pictures of body parts and ask them to identify these.

Pictures can be easily downloaded from free-use image libraries (such as Google Images and Microsoft Clipart) and enlarged or made by the children.

'Teddy' can then be introduced to ask the children to *use* the nouns they have learned and perform actions, for example:

- ❖ Teddy says '*point to your nose*'
- ❖ Teddy says '*clap your hands*'
- ❖ Teddy says '*shake your arm*'

Children can then be invited to take turns with Teddy to tell the others in the group what to do. This supports them to *use* oral language as well as to *understand* and *learn* new vocabulary.

5. Story Talk



Story talk aims to use the *pictures* presented in a story (with no text) to develop the children's abilities to describe and hypothesise about objects, people and activities. It also aims to develop the children's abilities to draw both *literal* and *inferential* conclusions.

It is possible to use any book in this activity but some useful ones to start with might be:

1. **Not Now Bernard** , David McKee, pbk 1982 (Sparrow Books)
2. **Lucy and Tom's Day**, Shirley Hughes , 1986 (Picture Puffins)
3. **Rosie's Walk** , Pat Hutchins, 1971 (Aladdin)
4. **Wilberforce goes on a picnic**, Margaret Gordon, 1982 (Morrow)
5. **Through my window**, Tony Bradman and Eileen Brown, 1994 (Mammoth)

The aim is to encourage the children to *talk* about each picture by using open ended questions such as:

1. '*What's happening here?*'
2. '*What do you think they are doing?*'
3. '*Have you ever.....?*'
4. '*Why do you think they did that?*'

It is not important to finish the story or even use every picture. Neither is it important for the child to say the 'right' thing or to tell the story correctly.

EXAMPLE:

On Friday Something Funny Happened, John Prater, 1993 (Red Fox Picture Books)

Open at pages 1 and 2:

Say: *'Let's have a look at these pictures.'*

Show LH page

'I wonder what's going on here?'

'How many children can you see?'

'Where do you think they are?'

'Who took them shopping?'

'Where do you think their mum/dad/nan is now?'

'Who's pushing the trolley?'

'What can you see in the trolley?'

'What's the little boy doing?'

'What do you think is in the cans/tins?'

'What do you think will happen if he pulls out the bottom can/tin?'

Show top picture, RH page

'Oh dear, what are they doing now?'

'Is that safe?'

Show bottom picture, RH page

'Oh, no, what's happened?'

'What's the little girl trying to do?'

'Who's going to get hurt?'

'Can you see what happened to the teddy bear?'

'What will mummy say/do?'

'Were the children being good in the shop?'

'Do you go shopping with your mum?'

'Where do you go?'

'What does your mum buy?'

'Do you help your mum or are you naughty like these children?'

Turn to pages 3 and 4

Show LH picture and say:

'I wonder where the children are now?'

'Where do you think they could be?'

'Do you think they went there by themselves?'

'Who do you think took them?'

'Do you think it was near to their house?'

'What are the children doing?'

'Have you tried to climb a tree?'

'Do you think you would like to?'

Show RH picture

'What are they doing now?'

'Why is the little girl's boot coming off?'

'Do you think the little boy is happy on the swing, or is he a bit worried? Why is he worried?'

'Do you like going high on a swing?'

'Do you think it's winter time or summer time?'

'Why do you think it's winter?'

Turn to pages 5 and 6**Show LH picture and say**

'Now what's the little girl doing?'

'Why are the ducks flying away?'

'What do you think the little boy is doing?'

'Is he happy?'

'Why is he not happy?'

Show RH pictures, clockwise from top left**1st picture**

'Was he sad, or do you think he was cross?'

'How do you know he's cross?'

'Who is he cross with?'

'Why is he cross with her?'

'What's going to happen to the little girl?'

2nd picture

'Oh, yes, she tripped and fell down.'

3rd picture

'Where did she fall?'

'Is she still happy?'

'Why is she upset?'

'Who else fell over?'

4th picture

'Now where are they?'

'What are they doing?'

'Why have they fallen asleep?'

'Where are they going?'

Turn to pages 7 and 8**Show LH picture**

'What's happening here?'

'What do you think the children are doing?'

'What have they wrapped round themselves?'

'Where did they get the sheets from?'

Show RH picture

'Where are the children now?'

'How do you know they're in the bathroom?'

'Are they being good?'

'Can you tell me some of the naughty things they've done?' (tea in toilet, squeezed out toothpaste, cloth in toilet, spilt soap powder).

'But do you think they were trying to be good?'

'What have they done with teddy and the scarf and the sheet?'

'What's the little girl doing?'

'Why does she need to hang the things on the clothes line?'

'Do you think their mum knows what they're doing?'

'Do you think she will be pleased with them?'

'Why not?'

Turn to pages 9 and 10**Show LH picture**

'Some one came to see the children.'

'Who do you think he is?'

'Are they pleased to see him?'

'How do you know?'

'Is he pleased to see them too?'

'How do you know?'

'What did he bring with him?'

'Who do you think the flowers are for?'

'Where were the children when the visitor arrived?'

'How did they know he was there?'

Show RH pictures clockwise from top left 1st picture

'Look, they're having their dinner together.'

'What is the little girl doing now?'

'Does their uncle know she's doing that?'

'Do you think he likes lots of salt in his soup?'

2nd picture

'Now look, he's sniffing a lovely smell of dinner.'

'Who do you think is cooking the dinner?'

'Where is their mum?'

'And what's the little boy doing while his uncle isn't looking?'

'Can little boys drink wine?'

3rd picture

'Who told Uncle about the wine?'

'Is the little boy pleased with his sister?'

'Is uncle pleased with the little boy?'

4th picture

'Why are the children having a fight?'

'What's happened to poor uncle?'

'When you have visitors, are you naughty like that?'

'What do you do when your uncle comes to see you?'

Turn to pages 11 and 12

Show LH top picture

'Oh dear, they're still fighting!'
'Can you see what happened to Uncle's face?'
'How did he get soup all over his face?'
'And what hit him on the head?'

Show LH bottom picture

'What's Uncle doing now?'
'Is he cross?'
'What is he saying to the children?'

Show RH pictures, clockwise from top left

1st picture

'Now where are they taking Uncle?'
'What's the little boy doing?'
'Do you like to have a piggy back ride?'
'Do you pull your uncle like that?'

2nd picture

'What does Uncle want to do?'
'Do you think he likes to have his nose tickled by a feather?'

3rd picture

'Oh dear, can you see what happened to Uncle's cup of tea?'
'How did it get spilt?'

4th picture

'Where's Uncle going now?'
'How do you think he's feeling?'

Turn to pages 13 and 14

Show LH pictures

'Why is the little girl lifting her brother up?'
'What can you see in the cupboard?'
'What are they for?'

Show RH pictures, clockwise from L

1st picture

'What is the little girl going to do now?'
'Why is the paint tin falling over?'
'What will happen to the paint?'

2nd picture

'Is it sticky?'
'How do you know?'

3rd picture

'Is it slippery?'

Turn to pages 15 and 16

Show LH picture

'What's hanging out of the window?'

'What is the little boy doing?'

'What happened to the cat?'

'What's the little girl trying to do?'

'Does their mum know what they're doing?'

'Will she be pleased?'

'Why not?'

Show RH pictures, clockwise from L

1st picture:

'What's mummy saying to the children?'

'Do you think she likes their painting?'

'Does your mummy let you paint the house?'

'Can children do that?'

2nd picture

'Now what's happening?'

'Why do they need a bath?'

3rd picture

'Are they having a nice time in the bath?'

'What are they doing?'

'Why is Teddy having his hair washed?'

'Do you like to put your head under the shower?'

'Does the little girl like that?'

Turn to pages 17 and 18

Show RH picture & point to children on left, playing nurses.

'What are these two doing now?'

'Who came to play with them?'

'What are their friends doing?'

Show RH pictures

'Who is riding the tricycles?'

'Why are the young children hiding?'

'Are the children having a good time?'

'Do your friends sometimes come to your house?'

'What games do you play with your friends?'

'Do you have fun like this?'

Turn to pages 19 and 20

Show whole big picture & point to two children on left

'What are these two doing?'

'Why are there feathers flying around in their bedroom?'

'Who's dropping the bricks?'

'Who's tearing up a book?'

'What will mummy say if she sees this mess?'

'Do you make a mess like this sometimes?'

'What does your mum say?'

Turn to pages 21 and 22

Show LH picture

'So what are the children doing now?'

Show RH pictures clockwise from left

1st picture

'What is the little boy doing?'

2nd picture

'What is the little girl doing?'

'Are they being naughty?'

'Are they making a noise?'

'Are they making a mess?'

3rd picture

'What are they doing here?'

'Do you watch television?'

'Do you sit on the floor to watch it?'

'What are the children having to eat?'

'Who's sitting in the chair?'

'What is dad doing?'

'Is everything quiet?'

'What happened to make the children so good?'

Turn to pages 23 and 24

'Why is this man rubbing his toes?'

'Why is this man rubbing his head?'

'What happened to the toilet rolls?'

'Are the children being good in the shop today?'

'What would your mum do if you were as naughty as this!'

6. Hexagons



Topics available (on DVD and for download):

1. At School
2. Baking Biscuits
3. Dropping Oranges
4. Eating Ice Cream
5. Eid Party
6. Going to School
7. Losing Toy Plane
8. Shopping
9. Swings Fall
10. Visiting the Doctor

At the end of this handbook there is a sample set of hexagons ready for you to print and laminate for your own use. A larger selection can be found on the DVD itself (see above) in a separate folder in PDF format. These can be opened and used in the same way. In the near future, the Institute of Education website will contain a link to yet more. You can also easily create sets customized to your own needs with a digital camera, mounted on hexagon shaped cards.



The **Hexagon Activity** is designed to support the development of narrative language. The first aim of the activity is to provide opportunities for *conversation*, to allow the children to *think* and *talk* about pictured events and relate these to their own experiences and feelings.



It also provides good opportunities for staff to *model language* to the children. By providing (cumulative) summaries of the events the children have discussed (see detailed instructions below), you will be modeling 'story structure' for the children. Stories have a beginning, a middle and an end. However, this activity is not a sequencing exercise and there are no right or wrong answers.



1. **Select one topic** from the sets of hexagons on DVD.

Begin by choosing just 3 hexagon cards. Later on you might want to use four hexagons, but three is fine. Choose the ones you feel most comfortable with as conversational prompts. Choose one of the hexagons to talk about and put it on the table where the children can easily see it. If you feel that the children would talk more readily if the task was introduced as 'let's tell the doll (or give him/her a name) about these pictures', you could introduce one doll at this point and use him/her in that way. You should always keep the other doll hidden for later.

2. All that is required is that the **children are encouraged to talk about each picture.**

Make sure that you encourage all children to take part in the conversation. It might seem a little stilted at first, but persevere! 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 doll, if you have been using one.

3. To encourage conversation, you might find the following **questions** useful.

However there is no need to stick to these if the children are leading the talk in other directions.

a) *What can we see in this picture?*

One child might respond 'man' and you could then expand on this by saying 'yes, there's a man looking in the window.'

b) *Can we see anything else?*

You could use this prompt to encourage a quiet child to respond.

c) *What's happening?*

Example:

A child might say 'boy go shop' and this could be recast by saying, 'yes, the boy is going into the shop'

- *What are they doing?*

- *Have you ever...?*

Example :

The child might say 'Been shopping, baked biscuits, fallen over'

d) *I wonder why they did that?*

This form of 'wondering' question allows you to model a response if the children are initially uncertain as to how to respond. Unlikely and silly wonderings often work well to provoke a response from very young children e.g. for baking biscuits, you could wonder what the children were stirring in the bowl;

e.g. 'perhaps they've got some wriggly worms in there?!'

Use words you know they understand!

e) *Who do you think that is?*

4. When you've exhausted the possibilities of the first picture you chose, **put another hexagon beside it.**

You could **summarise** conversation around the first picture into the start of a story at this point e.g. baking biscuits: "so the children are getting ready to do some cooking". Then it becomes natural to ask a further question as you put the next picture down e.g. "I wonder what they're going to cook?"

5. Introduce the next picture in the same way, by providing a **summary** of what's happened so far.

E.g. 'so the children were going to do some cooking and they put the flour and sugar and butter in the bowl and stirred it up.'

6. When you've exhausted the conversational possibilities of the third card you chose, **tell the 'story' again**, and finish it from the third picture:

E.g. 'so the children were going to do some cooking, and they put the flour and sugar and butter in the bowl and stirred it up, and then they cooked the biscuits in the oven.'

7. After that, **introduce the hidden doll** and introduce him/her to the children.

The dolls will quickly become known by their names and you won't always have to introduce them! Once the children are accustomed to the task, they could decide which doll they want to hide to miss the talking.

Say something like, *'Oh dear, poor dolly doesn't know what we were talking about! He/she missed all our story. Who'd like to tell him/her what we were talking about?'*



7. Organising Groups and Activities

Small Groups

All of these activities are designed to be used with small groups of children. Ideally groups should consist of no more than 5 children and, in order to promote conversation, should be representative of different language levels within the classroom. In the 'talking time' project we found that children enjoyed having a name for their language group. Animal names such as 'tigers', 'lions', 'crocodiles' and 'elephants' were popular. They also liked having a badge to identify them with their group. These were a useful tool in classroom organization and could again, be made by the children themselves.

Frequency and Duration

To benefit from the language programme, each child needs to take part in two of the language activities each week for about ten or fifteen minutes. It is recommended that, particularly with children whose oral language may be delayed, the 'acting out', 'teddy says' and 'story-talk' activities are used with the children for the first ten weeks or so of the programme. When the children are confident in understanding and using vocabulary, one of the tasks can then be replaced by the narrative 'hexagon' task. More able or older children may be ready to start immediately on this task.

Weekly timetable

It can be challenging in a busy nursery or reception class to organise the week in such a way as to enable each child to participate in small group language activities. We found it useful to devise a timetable such as that shown below.

To save time finding the children in each group (particularly in a nursery where the children played outside a lot) we found it helpful to do the activities immediately after the children were all together in a large group, for example after registration, breaktime or lunchtime. This also meant that children were not being asked to leave an activity they were enjoying to take part in the language activities. This is not always possible in every early years setting but, in practice, we found the children eager to take part in the groups and often disappointed if it wasn't their turn!

Examples of Groups:

Lions	Tigers	Elephants	Crocodiles	Rabbits
Emily	Aneeqa	Levi	Ian	Ralf
Nazeem	Charlotte	Harry	Carrie	Tobi
Jonathon	Sumayaiya	Lee	Fatima	Caroline
Ikram	Sara	Shakir	Elizabeth	Jaden

Weekly Activities

Activity	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
Story Talk	Lions	Tigers	Elephants	Crocodiles	Rabbits
Acting Out	Rabbits	Crocodiles	Lions	Tigers	Elephants

8. Literacy Today Extract

This article first appeared in the September 2004 issue of 'Literacy Today' (Issue 40)

Supporting Early Oral Language Skills

By Julie Dockrell, Morag Stuart and Diane King

Julie Dockrell, Morag Stuart and Diane King of the University of London discuss the importance of oral language development in the early years and report on their research initiative, Talking Time, for children in nurseries.

The importance of oral language skills is now firmly positioned in the National Literacy Strategy and in the Stepping Stones outlined for the Foundation Stage curriculum. Throughout these documents the emphasis is on using the whole curriculum to provide opportunities for modelling "appropriate speaking and listening".

The focus on language for communication and language acquisition within communicative contexts is supported by much of the recent language acquisition research. Young children are more likely to use those words and grammatical phrases that they are exposed to in natural interactions with their carers. Thus the carer's use of language acts as a fundamental support for early language development. Speaker's intentions help guide children in their word learning and provide an important forum for developing awareness of the pragmatics of language.

Nearly all of this research is based on studies that focus on the opportunities offered by interaction between a child and an adult. For many children these early interactions will provide the initial foundations for developing the more sophisticated aspects of language outlined in the recently published National Strategy for Speaking and Listening. These build on and extend the approach first outlined in Teaching speaking and listening in Key Stages 1 and 2 (QCA, 1999).

Many children, however, will not have had sufficient exposure to the kinds of language they will encounter in nurseries and schools. Both the amount and the nature of the oral language input children receive impacts on their subsequent language development and there are significant differences in the amount of oral language input pre-school children experience. The language models provided by adults and peers have a significant impact on a child's developing oral language skills.

Adult recasts of children's utterances and the drawing of appropriate contrasts between words and grammatical constructions are particularly important. In a recast, the adult replies to the child's utterance by copying some of the child's words but also by providing new syntactic or semantic information. The basic details of the child's original meaning are maintained. For example, the child's statement, "It go there" when

describing where a paint brush should be placed, can be recast by the adult as, "Yes, the brush goes in the pot". Recasts have been shown to stimulate length and complexity of utterances in children.

In addition contrasts between words provide children with information about the concepts signified by different words and support the development of a rich vocabulary system. The introduction of a new colour term can be contrasted with known colour terms or the introduction of a new size term can be contrasted with known size terms - "It is not the big one, it is the tiny one". This relationship between oral language exposure and oral language acquisition holds across a range of situations including bilingual language acquisition and acquisition for children with specific communication difficulties.

For some children the environmental opportunity to develop language is less rich than for others. Moreover, not all children are equally equipped to learn from the English language experiences they receive: English may be an additional language; they may experience hearing problems, such as otitis media; or the children may have additional special educational needs. These differential opportunities are not a trivial factor since early language skills can have long lasting effects on later academic attainment; it has been estimated, for example, that vocabulary assessed at age six is a strong predictor of reading comprehension at age 16. Thus, differences in children's experiences have an important impact on how prepared the child is to take advantage of the language exposures that are offered in nurseries and schools. For many children the further exposures they receive in nurseries and schools will be of significant importance in moderating the effects of these early differences.

Findings from longitudinal studies support the view that gains in receptive and expressive language skills can occur as a result of participation in quality nursery provision, yet current evidence suggests that, on the whole, pre-school settings are not sensitive language learning environments. They are dominated by teacher talk and this talk has been criticised as being overly directive and unresponsive. The role of teacher talk and the conversational style of the teacher are moderated by a number of variables including the size of the group of children working with a teacher. Our own research in 12 inner-city nurseries has extended these findings. We found that, while in many cases there were excellent small group opportunities that supported oral language development, many children did not have sufficient opportunity to develop their oral language competence. Frequently the children chose to spend large amounts of time in contexts where less supportive language was evident, such as playgrounds and free play. All nurseries offered exposure to books but this frequently occurred in large group settings where children did not have the chance to benefit from the teacher's language scaffolds.

In 2000 we devised a project called Talking Time that aimed to address

some of the inequities in children's early language skills. Our aim was to place children in a better position to take advantage of the oral language they would be exposed to in primary school. Talking Time supports the goals of the foundation stage level curriculum by providing opportunities for children to communicate their thoughts, ideas and feelings and by giving opportunities to share stories and experiences. However, we realised that to do this children needed to experience small group opportunities with staff skilled in supporting oral language. Staff also needed to recognise and build on the children's current levels of functioning.

We introduced our activities to staff working in inner-city nurseries. Many of the children in the nurseries, the majority of whom had English as a second language, were neither speaking nor understanding at the expected level for their age - indeed the children's oral language was, on average, two years behind what would be expected. Staff were provided with in-service sessions that considered oral language development, the skills of the children in their nurseries and the ways in which oral language could be supported.

Talking Time was built around three activities designed to increase:

1. Children's vocabulary, through the use of specially chosen drama activities.
2. Predictive use of language, through the use of open ended questioning.
3. Narrative skill, through the use of sets of pictures from familiar tasks and activities.

Children 'worked' twice a week in groups of five or six for a period of six months. The groups comprised children with varying levels of oral language competence, which ensured a variety of child and adult talk. Fidelity of the intervention was ensured by weekly visits to the nursery and children's language skills were assessed at the beginning and end of the intervention. We compared the progress of children in the Talking Time intervention to that of children given the same amount of additional small group exposure just to storybook reading, and to that of children experiencing good pre-school nursery provision.

To date the results of the study are promising. Children in the Talking Time intervention made significantly more progress than children in the alternative intervention in terms of both their receptive and expressive vocabulary: they both understood and produced more words than the comparison children. Talking Time also impacted on syntactic development, with significantly more progress in the Talking Time children's ability to repeat increasingly complex sentences, and to produce longer sentences in their own oral language production. Thus, there was evidence that the building blocks of narrative skill were beginning to be

put in place.

However, despite this pleasing acceleration of progress, the overall language skills of the children were still a cause for concern. On a standardised test of expressive vocabulary, the overall mean score for the 'Talking Time' children put them at the 15th percentile of the population (i.e. 85 per cent of children of their age would perform better than this). Their mean score on a standardised test of verbal comprehension put them at the 10th percentile (i.e. 90 per cent of children of this age would perform better than this). In contrast, on a standardised measure of non-verbal cognitive ability, their mean score put them at the 45th percentile, i.e. well within the normal range.

So, we have a mixed message to convey. With carefully planned, structured and monitored language input, it is certainly possible to accelerate the development of children's oral language skills, to enable them to start catching up with their peers. However, a programme lasting for only six months is not enough to get the children to where they ought to be. We would like to see Talking Time built into the nursery curriculum throughout the children's time in nursery, and extended to continue throughout the Reception Year.

Devising a supportive framework for oral language is not easy. Careful preparation is needed to ensure that all children receive these experiences on a regular basis in naturally occurring interactions. Moreover, it is not sufficient simply to provide 'good models'; the language from the adult needs to be carefully tuned to the child's language. It needs to be offered in such a way as to extend and support, and children need plenty of opportunity to practise their fledgling skills. This is especially challenging where children enter nurseries using only a few words and with limited English language comprehension.

Available at: <http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/Pubs/dockrell.html>

9. Further Reading

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