



Best Practices

Most older toddlers are competent communicators who can use language to tell stories, reason, plan, imagine, and ask questions. Educators can support their learning by providing interesting things to talk about and interested people to talk with. They can offer children rich opportunities to learn about real-world topics in depth and to explore, pretend, and create with interesting materials. They can engage children in vocabulary- and concept-building conversations that elicit, respect, and build upon each child's ideas. They can make sure that *all* children participate in rich conversations with both adults and peers.

Engage Children in Conversations that Go Beyond the Here and Now

Researchers have found that engaging young children in extended conversations that go beyond the here and now is one of the most effective ways to build their vocabularies and create strong foundations for literacy. These conversations may be about things that happened in the past or might happen in the future. They might include reasoning, planning, wondering, remembering, play-acting, or storytelling. Educators can find many opportunities to extend their conversations with children during book reading, play, art and construction activities, and in private moments when they can talk with just one child.

- **Help children tell their stories by showing interest, asking questions, and filling in missing information.** Ask questions such as “And then what happened?” to keep the story going and to help children explain how events relate to each other. Help children add detail as they retell stories. Research shows that toddlers who engage with adults in lots of storytelling and *elaborated reminiscing* (recalling past events and adding new details as they tell the story over and over again) become better storytellers and better pretend play partners as preschoolers, develop stronger language and vocabulary, and are likely to remember more about both past and new events.
- **Make children think.** Older toddlers can put ideas together and are beginning to make logical connections and informed predictions. Educators can stimulate and support their thinking. To do this, educators might wonder aloud, ask “why” and “what if” questions, suggest new possibilities, supply or ask about missing connections between statements or ideas, or model their own reasoning and problem-solving.

How can educators help toddlers to tell their stories and express their ideas?

- Educators can:

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- Listen closely. Make comments and ask questions that show their interest and understanding.
- Ask about missing information or details so they can better understand the story, idea, or explanation.
- Supply words that a toddler may be trying to say but does not yet know. Add any remembered details if invited, but don't take over the toddler's story.
- Ask toddlers what they think and why.
- Pause when reading a story to let toddlers ask questions. Respond by supplying answers, asking for their ideas, or finding out the answer together.
- Use rituals such as group meetings and drawing in journals to help children plan outings and activities and talk about what they did, what they learned, and what they might want to do in the future.
- Ask children what they know and what they want to know about a topic and how they could find out.
- Be patient and give toddlers enough time to respond.

How can educators encourage toddlers to make logical connections and explain and expand their thinking?

- Educators can:
 - Model their own thinking, reasoning, or approach to solving a problem.
 - Give toddlers time to formulate their ideas as they respond to questions or tell stories.
 - Ask a series of "why" questions, for example, "Why do the caterpillar's eyes look funny?" (Toddler: "He's sad.") "Why is he sad?" (Toddler: "His tummy hurts.") "Why does his tummy hurt?" (Toddler: "He ate too much.")
 - Ask toddlers to predict what might happen, let them test their predictions, and then talk with them about their discoveries.

What benefits do older toddlers gain from extended conversations that go beyond the here and now?

- Older toddlers gain the following benefits:
 - Mutually engaging conversations with five or more exchanges offer toddlers opportunities to express feelings and ideas; develop fluency and conversational skills; strengthen their sense of themselves as people with important things to say; and learn, practice, and use new words.

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- Asking and answering questions about past events and telling and retelling stories of what happened helps build memory, storytelling skill, logical thinking, and vocabulary. Shared stories strengthen children's relationships with family members, educators, and peers.
- Conversations about things that are beyond everyday experience, such as topics children may learn about from books, photographs and videos, and adult experts, expand children's horizons, spark new questions, fuel their imaginations, and often allow them to learn and use new words that may not be part of the typical toddler's vocabulary.
- Conversations that involve planning, predicting, hypothesizing ("What do you think will happen if ...?"), and imagining support logical thinking and creativity as well as language.

What experiences can educators provide for older toddlers to spark interesting, extended conversations?

- Educators can:
 - Read fiction and nonfiction books or magazines and have them available for children to look at on their own and with each other.
 - Help children explore interesting scientific phenomena (such as insect and frog life cycles, melting and freezing, and condensation and evaporation) indoors, outside, and through images and videos on line.
 - Ask family members to share their skills, hobbies, and stories and to teach songs and games in their home languages.
 - Offer interesting art and building materials to explore and create with.
 - Bring in unusual items and artifacts for children to investigate.
 - Encourage family members to bring in photos, food packaging, artifacts, and other reminders of home.

Help All Children Participate in Language-Building Conversations

Older toddlers who use language well have many advantages. They can ask questions, tell stories, explain what they want or how they feel, and negotiate conflicts using words that others understand. Their relatively rich vocabularies impress adults, who respond to their comments and questions with more information and more complex language than they would use with a

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less verbal child. Other children like to talk with these toddlers as well and include them in their pretend play.

Older toddlers whose language is less developed, or whose strongest language is not shared by others, may be left out of the very conversation opportunities that are most likely to strengthen their language and their interpersonal relationships. Children who tend to be reserved, are new to the group, come from cultures where children are not encouraged to initiate conversations, or have less developed social skills may also be left out. It is especially important that educators create intentional language-building opportunities for children who are less likely to participate.

- **Use interactive reading techniques to engage all children.** While sharing a story, give children lots of opportunities to point out details, chime in on chorus lines, ask questions, and make connections with their own experiences. Build on what they offer by continuing the conversation and pulling in others. Make a special point of including children who may be less likely to participate, giving them conversational openings by referring to their interests and experiences, and giving them the time they need to formulate their thoughts.
- **Scaffold pretend play.** Create spaces that invite pretend play on themes that interest children and relate to their experiences and the books they enjoy. Help children find and create any props they need. Help children who are less likely to be included to join in by giving them props to share, teaching them what to say, responding to their contributions, and bringing in their favorite toys. When playing an invited role, expand the game by introducing humor, using theme-related vocabulary, or adding a new element. Help children take on roles, speak in character, and respond to others in ways that are appropriate for the game.
- **Help children learn new words in all of their languages.** It is common for children learning more than one language to know different words in each language. Learning conceptually related words together is helpful to all children, but it can be especially helpful when children are learning words in a new language for concepts that they already know.

What interactive reading techniques can educators use that work well with older toddlers, including those who speak comfortably in full sentences and those who are still learning to do so?

- Educators can:
 - Ask toddlers to point to pictures and find details.
 - Talk about the pictures with toddlers. Ask toddlers to name or describe what they see.

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- Encourage each child to participate in his own way. Focus on what a child means to say, not how he pronounces the words or what language or communication system he uses.
- Give toddlers time to repeat new words. Together say words that sound interesting and talk about what they mean.
- Say and repeat sound effects and repeated lines or choruses together.
- Pause during reading so toddlers can fill in words they know.
- Let children interrupt the story to point out interesting details or ask questions. Answer their questions, elaborate on their comments, or ask them to show or to tell more.
- Connect a story detail or event to something a toddler has recently experienced.
- Talk with toddlers about how characters in the story might be feeling. Link the conversation to their own feelings and experiences.

What benefits do older toddlers gain from frequent interactive reading, one-to-one or in small groups, and from pretend play with other children?

- Older toddlers:
 - Learn new words, concepts, and facts from books and book-related conversation.
 - Hear rich language and engage in conversations that go beyond the here and now.
 - Learn and practice new vocabulary and storytelling skills as they play with peers and apply what they have learned in one context to another.
 - Through pretend play with peers, learn to take on roles, follow a plan or script, consider others' feelings and ideas, and negotiate to resolve differences. These experiences build executive function skills, such as working memory (holding things in mind), mental flexibility (looking at something in a different way), impulse control, and focus, that help children continue to be successful learners as they get older.

How can educators help older toddlers play out pretend themes together, using props, roles, and dialogue?

- Educators can:
 - Set the stage. Provide prop collections and appropriate play settings.

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- Offer flexible materials and help children create their own props and settings.
- Join the play themselves. Play the role in character. Use role appropriate behavior (for example, a customer might ask how much something costs), humor, questions, good manners, and so on as they further a child's or small group's game.
- Give children enough time to finish their pretend play.

How else can educators assure that children who may be left out get the benefits of interactive reading and pretend play conversations?

- An educator can:
 - Find private time to follow up with children individually. For example, in the video, Kerry repeats a boy's suggestion that they might see "fire police cars" but doesn't build on it in the conversation. Later she might help him listen for sirens, read a book about emergency vehicles, or play out a pretend rescue with her or another child.
 - Note a child's interest and bring in related books or pretend play materials.
 - Help children share their interests with others in pretend play or by drawing or demonstrating.
 - Share a favorite book with a child several times; then let him be her helper as she shares it with a larger group.
 - Give children something to do during a small group conversation, such as drawing in journals, eating a snack, or sculpting with play dough or sand. It's easier for a toddler to wait for her chance to talk when her hands are busy.
 - Talk with a child's family about his unique strengths and interests and bring more of what he likes at home into the child care setting.

Use Math Talk Throughout the Day

Older toddlers explore mathematical (and other STEM-related) ideas as they build with blocks and other materials, put similar objects together into collections or arrange them by size, identify shapes in their world and show them with their bodies, and put events in order to tell a story. They may use math and STEM talk as they work out problems that an educator might help them pose, such as "How many more blocks do we need to complete our building?" or "How do these puzzle pieces fit together?" Math talk and STEM talk, and the hands-on experiences that make

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it meaningful, helps prepare toddlers for the more symbolic math that they will do when they get to preschool and kindergarten.

Many older toddlers can count to ten or beyond, but they may not fully understand what the numbers mean. For example, they may not think of 7 peanuts as more than 5 elephants or realize that if each elephant gets 1 peanut there will be 2 left over. Similarly, they may not fully realize that when they spread out a clump of 10 peanuts they still have the same amount, even though it may look like more because it seems to cover more space. Number sense develops over time and through many experiences.

- **Talk with children about shape, size, and quantity.** Use a variety of vocabulary words, such as *corner, oval, narrow, enormous, heavier, shrink, inch, exactly,* and *hundreds*. Help children make connections with real-world objects and experiences, for example, octagonal stop signs and the squares they can count within rectangular windows. When reading books, help toddlers understand concepts such as how big or small things really are or how much time things take. Is a caterpillar as big as their finger or yours? How long is the “more than two weeks” that it stayed in the cocoon?
- **Talk with children about space and time, order and sequence, patterns and relationships.** Help children use math talk to think through problems they are trying to solve, using words such as *first, next, before, strategy, predict, tomorrow,* and *Tuesday*. Toddlers who hear explanations, time and sequence words, and other math talk frequently come to see the world as a predictable place where they can make sense out of things if they work at it. They are more likely to develop the mental flexibility, goal-directed behavior, and persistence that helps them cope with future challenges.

How can educators help older toddlers connect abstract math and STEM concepts such as number, amount, duration (how long something takes), order, and density with physical experiences?

- Educators can:
 - Take pictures of children's activities or learning or creation processes. Help children put the pictures in order and reminisce together or tell the story to family members.
 - Help children understand the scale of things they read about in books by talking about how they compare with real objects or by making chalk outlines on the floor or outside that are approximately life-size. For example, an educator might compare a dinosaur's size with a school bus, make a chalk drawing of its head or tooth, or make dinosaur footprints that children can walk in.
 - During sensory play, cooking, and art/construction projects, give children lots of practice filling containers of various sizes and shapes and using a larger

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container to fill several smaller ones. Help them make and test predictions about which holds more, will there be enough, how many will fit, and how much they need.

- Use math talk with children as they help set up and serve snacks. Give each child a turn to be a snack helper who offers others “two pieces” or asks friends how many they want.
- Ask math questions such as “What comes next in your pattern?” “Will this be big enough?” “Which ones go together?” “How many more do you think we need?”
- Model problem-solving approaches and strategies. Help children tell what they are trying to do and what they think might work or want to try.
- Help children talk through steps in a process, such as making play dough or setting the table for a fancy tea party.

What benefits do children gain from math talk?

- Children gain the following benefits:
 - They learn math and problem-solving vocabulary and often learn rich, descriptive vocabulary as well.
 - They practice mathematical thinking and processes such as ordering, comparing, counting, and reasoning.
 - They learn over time that they can make sense out of their world. This helps them to develop mental flexibility, goal-directed behavior, persistence in the face of challenge, and emotional resilience.

How can educators make sure that all children get the benefits of math talk?

- Educators can:
 - Make math talk part of group rituals and daily play and learning activities.
 - Engage individual children in extended conversations that go beyond the here and now. Make time to listen to their stories and help them remember the sequence of events.
 - Let children show what they may have difficulty telling. Give them words for their actions, questions, and discoveries.
 - Some children shine at math and STEM challenges but have weaker language or are less fluent in the language that other children use. Give them a chance to teach others what they know.

- Make a special effort to include children whose language or mathematical understanding may be less developed than others' in math talk conversations.

Glossary

elaborated reminiscing: helping a child tell and retell the story of a past event, adding more details with each retelling

interactive reading: stopping at many points during the reading to engage children in related conversation that helps them follow the story, draw connections between the book and their own experiences, and learn more; also called *dialogic reading*

math talk: talk about number, amount, order, size, shape, pattern, direction, sequence, and other mathematical concepts as well as mathematical questions such as “How many altogether?” “What’s missing?” “How many more do we need?”

number sense: an intuitive understanding of numbers and how they relate to each other, as well as how they are affected by addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division

Picture Communication System (PECS): a picture-based communication intervention that teaches children with autism spectrum disorder and related challenges to initiate communications

scaffold: to provide a support or boost that helps a child master a new challenge or concept or take a skill to a new level

STEM: science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, as integrated fields of inquiry

View the self-paced video workshop at <http://resourcesforearlylearning.org/educators>.