

TALKING ABOUT TALK

Why oral language is the foundation of reading, writing and learning

In 1976, James Britton wrote that reading and writing “*float on a sea of talk.*” Six years later, after extensive classroom research, Douglas Barnes broadened this to the idea that *learning itself floats on a sea of talk.* Since then, many studies have confirmed that early oral language skills predict later proficiency in reading and writing.

Oral Language

Comprises both speaking AND listening.

Development is already well underway before school, you've already supported the beginning and early phases. Most children arrive in the exploratory phase: sharing experiences, using some grammatical structures, asking questions.

At school, we explicitly teach children to use language to communicate and learn, building toward consolidation and extension.

In the Dialogic Classroom

We strategically set up teaching and learning activities to grow oral language, including structured, scaffolded conversations.

Conversation monitors, talking sticks, counters.

Practising “waiting for the quiet moment” to add an idea.

Sentence starters and vocabulary development activities.

Remembering and practising ‘Listening.’

How You Can Support at Home

Dialogic Reading

- Read aloud daily, a wide variety of books expose children to new vocabulary and sentence structures.
- Discuss the text: characters' feelings, retelling, settings and events.
- Evaluate the information and ideas in a text.
- Connect books to your own life, other books and world events.
- Share what you enjoyed about it.

Dialogic Viewing

- Discuss films and shows together, the story, the characters' choices, and their consequences.
- “Did you like the ending?”
- “What else could have happened?”
- “What would have happened next?”

Vocabulary Building

- Be intentional about using sophisticated words, don't ‘dumb it down’.
- Ask questions and take turns in conversation.
- Challenge your child to explain: why, how, what?
- Try: “Tell me more about that,” “What else was happening?”, “Thank you for letting me know.”
- Break problems into steps: first, then, after that ...
- Game tip: What's the Meme? (Junior) builds vocabulary.

Talking well about books is the best rehearsal there is for talking well about everything else in a child's life. Helping them “to be articulate about the rest of their lives.”

— Aidan Chambers, 1993

Thank you for helping your child become a confident, articulate communicator; at home, at school, and everywhere in between.

References: Britton (1976); Barnes (1976); Chambers (1993).