

How to Build Language and Literacy Through Powerful Conversations

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We've known for quite a while that the number of words a young child hears matters. A study from the 1990s showed that children who were exposed to a greater number of words from a young age went on to have better vocabulary, language, and reading comprehension skills than those who heard fewer words.

But recent research is shifting the focus from the number of words a child hears to the *quality* of the interaction between the adult and the child. It turns out that it's the *kind of conversation* a child is engaged in, rather than the number of words he hears, that makes the biggest difference to his language and literacy development.



What is a High-quality Conversation?

The kind of conversation that provides the best context for a child to build his language and literacy skills is one in which:

- the adult and child are enjoying each other's company
- the adult follows the child's lead by talking about what interests him
- the adult and child take back-and-forth turns, keeping the conversation going for as long as possible

Building Language and Literacy Skills

Now that we know the best context for language and literacy learning, what are some specific strategies you can apply during these conversations to build the key skills your child needs to learn, like vocabulary, critical thinking, reading comprehension and print knowledge?

Here are 10 helpful ideas from The Hanen Centre's 2017 Language and Literacy Calendar:



Strategy: Expand your child's message

Tip to apply this strategy

Pay attention to your child's words and gestures, and respond immediately by including those words and gestures in a more complete sentence. For example, if he says, "wash" or "wash hands", you can say, "Yes, let's wash our hands with soap." This will give him a model of the language he might use when he's ready.

What your child will learn

- How to use longer sentences, starting with combining a few words and gradually developing more complete sentences
- How to share ideas and communicate effectively

Strategy: Add new words

Tip to apply this strategy

When your child uses a simple word during book reading, use it as an opportunity to introduce a more sophisticated word. For example, if the child comments, “His eyes are so big!”, you could say, “You’re right – his eyes are **gigantic!** I’ve never seen eyes that big before!” Remember to repeat the new word in other situations to help your child remember it.

What your child will learn

- How to use and understand more words (everyday words, as well as rarer words that child will encounter in books and at school)



Strategy: Make storytelling a part of your day

Tip to apply this strategy

While visiting a place your child has been to before, encourage him to tell you what happened the last time he was there. Ask questions and make comments that help him clarify what he means and include all the important details. For example, “Oh, you played Frisbee the last time you were at this park! Who did you play with?”

What your child will learn

- How to tell and understand stories, which is critical for both effective conversations and story comprehension
- New vocabulary
- More complex language (e.g., past tense)

Strategy: Make explanations part of your day

Tip to apply this strategy

Ask your child to think of an explanation for the actions or emotions of a character in a book. For example, “Scaredy Squirrel seems really frightened to leave his nut tree. Why do you think he is so afraid?”

What your child will learn

- An understanding of cause and effect
- Story comprehension
- How to think critically
- New vocabulary



Strategy: Get your child involved in solving problems

Tip to apply this strategy

Draw your child’s attention to small problems that arise throughout the day, and encourage him to think of solutions. For example, “Oh no, we’ve run out of glue to finish our art. What can we do?” When possible, give your child a chance to try out his solution, even if you think there’s a better one.

What your child will learn

- How to think critically
- New vocabulary

Strategy: Talk about what could happen next

Tip to apply this strategy

Ask questions and make comments throughout the day to encourage your child to predict what might happen next. For example, while visiting monkeys at the zoo, ask, “What do you think might happen if we walk right up to the glass? Do you think the monkey will come and say hello?” Wait for your child to respond, and then walk up together to see if the prediction was right.

What your child will learn

- More complex language (e.g., future tense)
- How to predict what will happen next, which is important for story comprehension



Strategy: Help your child see other perspectives

Tip to apply this strategy

Help your child think about how others might feel by encouraging him to “put himself in the shoes” of another person or character. During book reading, you can ask your child what he would do if he found himself in the same situation as the book’s main character. For example, “If you were Gerald the giraffe, and all the other animals laughed at you and told you that giraffes can’t dance, what would you do?”

What your child will learn

- Story comprehension
- Empathy, which will help him communicate more effectively with others

Strategy: Look for print all around you

Tip to apply this strategy

Draw your child’s attention to print and written symbols during a pretend play activity. For example, you can help him set up a pretend grocery store using unopened packaged food items. Help him create signs out of cardboard or paper for each section of the store (for example, **Fruit**, **Canned Vegetables** and **Cereal**). Talk about why it’s important to have these signs in a grocery store.

What your child will learn

- How print works (e.g., that print is read from left to right and that letters combine to make words.)
- That print corresponds to spoken language



Strategy: Talk about letters and sounds

Tip to apply this strategy

Choose a rhyming book like *The Gruffalo* to draw your child’s attention to sounds. Stress the rhyming words and then talk about them. For example, “He has terrible tusks, and terrible **claws**, and terrible teeth in his terrible **jaws**.” Point to the words and say, “Do you see how the ends of the words sound the same? **Claws** sounds like **jaws**.”

What your child will learn

- Sound awareness that will prepare him for reading and writing (e.g., understanding that words can be broken down into syllables and smaller sounds, and that letters correspond to certain sounds.)

Strategy: Making writing a natural part of your day

Tip to apply this strategy

While your child is drawing or pretending to write on a piece of paper or chalk board, have a conversation about what he has done, asking questions and making enthusiastic comments. If he has drawn letters that don't really look like letters, don't worry about it – just encourage his attempts. Properly formed letters will come with time.

What your child will learn

- That writing conveys a message
- That written messages consist of letters that make up words



More References

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