

Learning-oriented talk: Professional learning resource 2

Cognitive State Talk

What is cognitive state talk and why is it important?

Our cognitive states are our knowledge and thoughts. Cognitive state talk includes words that refer to **knowing** and **thinking** (e.g., *know, remember, realise, understand, think, guess*) and **imagination** (e.g., *pretend, dream, imagine*).

Cognitive states are ‘inner states’ as they cannot be seen or perceived directly by other people. By expressing what they know and think, children share their inner states with others. The use of cognitive state talk opens up children’s inner worlds for discussion. This helps children to become more aware of what they and other people know and how they and others learn. An ability to reflect on and discuss their own and others’ cognitive states creates opportunities for children to take control of their own learning and contribute to the learning of their peers.

How does children’s use of cognitive state talk develop over time?

Most children start to use cognitive state words after they turn 3. In ToddlerTaLK, at age 2½ years less than 20% of the children used knowing and thinking words, and even fewer used imaginary state words. Early examples of cognitive state talk tend to be very simple, with children using phrases like ‘I know / don’t know’ or ‘I don’t remember’, usually when responding to a question (see example 1). Talk about knowing and thinking becomes more frequent and complex after age 3, with children using a greater variety of terms to talk about learning processes (examples 2 and 3). Imaginary state words, however, refer to much more abstract ideas, so it is not surprising that most children will only start using these after they turn 3½ years.

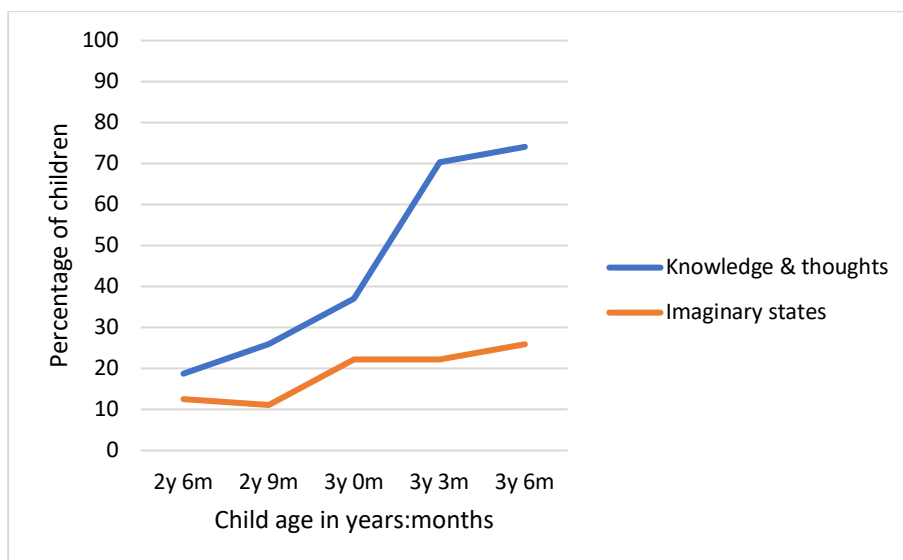


Figure 2: Development of ToddlerTaLK children’s use of cognitive state talk from 2 ½ to 3 ½ years.

Children’s use of cognitive state talk in practice

Examples	Interpretations
<p>Elliot (2y 6m) and other toddlers are having lunch. Educator: Hey, Elliot, how many blueberries are in your bowl? Elliot: <u>I don’t know</u>. Educator: Let’s count together. One, two, three.</p>	<p>Elliot is using the cognitive state word ‘know’. This shows that Elliot is aware of what he does and does not know, and allows him to communicate that the educator’s question is too challenging. This example reflects the child’s ability to ‘use strategies to reflect on and assess their learning and thinking’ (EYLF, p. 55, Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners).</p>
<p>Lucy (3y 6m) and Jessica (3y 5m) are playing blocks with other girls. Lucy: I <u>know</u> what to do. Jessica: What? Lucy: We can make a big tower and let it stand. It is pink. What do you <u>think</u>? I’m <u>thinking, thinking, thinking</u>. Jessica: Ok. Lucy: Let’s make a business. A business <u>means</u>... At business we have to... I <u>know</u>, we have to work. Work hard and we have to <u>think</u>.</p>	<p>Lucy is using cognitive state talk during play, which supports her to share her knowledge, collaborate and learn from her friend Jessica. Lucy uses the word ‘think’ not only to describe her own cognitive state but also to invite Jessica to share her ideas of what they could do next. This example highlights that “thinking and learning are interrelated and developed through interactions and experiences with others” (EYLF, p. 50, Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners).</p>

Educators can encourage children to use cognitive state talk by:

- Modelling the use of words like ‘know,’ ‘remember,’ ‘forget,’ and ‘think’ in everyday conversations across a range of activity contexts. This helps children learn these cognitive state terms and encourages them to use them themselves.
- Asking questions such as ‘What do you think ...?’ and ‘Do you remember ...?’ This encourages children to use these words when they reply.
- Using learning process phrases such as ‘figure out,’ ‘think about,’ ‘remember when/how,’ ‘find out,’ ‘discover’ and ‘re-think.’ These phrases put learning processes into words and enable children to become conscious of these mental activities.
- Using imaginary state words like ‘pretend,’ ‘imagine,’ ‘dream’ and ‘predict’ during play and problem-solving activities.
- Reading stories and drawing attention to the characters’ knowledge and thoughts. Many stories contain cognitive state words. In others, educators can use the story to discuss what a character might think, know or decide.

How does cognitive state talk support learning in early childhood services?

Children’s engagement and confidence in their learning (Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners) is evident when children “express wonder and interest in their environments”, “talk about what is happening ... when they are learning new things” (p. 51) and “use strategies to reflect on and assess their learning and thinking” (p. 55). Talking about their own and others’ opinions (e.g., Jo thinks that ...) supports children’s sense of identity (EYLF, Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity). Through cognitive state talk, children can “display awareness of and respect for others’ perspectives” (p. 36) and “respond to diversity with respect” (p. 39, Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world).

Cognitive state talk allows children to engage in pretend play and sustained interactions with others. Language that reflects children’s understanding of the perspectives of others and helps them negotiate their roles in play and other activities can also support a strong sense of wellbeing (Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing). Talking about the knowledge and thoughts of characters in stories and imagining how a reader may respond to a message they are writing (Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators).

How does cognitive state talk support learning when children start school?

Cognitive state talk can help children demonstrate ‘Oral language and communication skills’ (ENE-OLC-01) such as "listening for understanding" and “agreeing or disagreeing, adding to the comment of others, or sharing thoughts and feelings”. Children also learn to use “oral language to persuade, negotiate, give opinions or discuss ideas”.

To build ‘Reading comprehension’ (ENE-RECOM-01) and ‘Understanding and responding to literature’ (ENE-UARL-01), teachers invite children to talk about the thoughts, knowledge and motivations of story characters and the opinions of text authors and people in texts. Teachers also invite students to “share [their own] feelings and thoughts in response to characters and actions in texts” and to "compare opinions of a text or characters with peers”. They also ask students questions such as “Do you think you know what this story will be about?” and “model asking oneself questions while reading. For example: ‘Did that make sense?’, ‘I wonder why she did that?’, ‘What do I already know about this?’”. Questions such as “What do you think that person wants us to think?” or ‘Why do you think the character is poor?’ also encourage rich talk about and learning from literature.