

Learning-oriented talk: Professional learning resource 6

Past and Future Talk

What is past and future talk and why is it important?

Very young children's talk tends to be grounded in the 'here and now' with their conversations largely revolving around what they are doing or directly experiencing. **Past and future talk**, by contrast, involves talking about things outside of the immediate place and time of a conversation, about events, people and objects in the past or what may happen or exist in the future. **Past talk** involves reminiscing about the past and often is in the form of a story with a sequence of events (e.g. *Yesterday, I went shopping with dad. We had ice-cream*). **Future talk** involves predicting or hypothesising about what will or might happen and involves planning (e.g. *After lunch I am going to play with the playdough*) or announcing what is expected to happen (e.g. *At my party, we're going to have a dinosaur cake.*). Past and future talk are kinds of 'free talk' (see Resource #8), which is like writing because it can make sense on its own, without reference to the immediate context in which it occurs.

Past talk allows children to recount experiences and events, in a way that someone who did not participate in or witness these events can understand. Future talk allows them to make plans for and predictions about the future. Pretend play and science-learning experiences provide excellent opportunities for children to demonstrate and develop their skills in using future talk.

When do children start to use past and future talk?

After they turn two, children begin to incorporate past and future talk into their conversations. In the Toddler TaLK study, over half of the children were using past and future talk by the time they were 2½ years old. Past talk increased more rapidly until all children had been observed to use it by age 3¼. Example 1 shows how two-year-olds readily use the past tense to let others know what had happened the immediate past. Future talk emerged later than past talk, as it requires children to anticipate or imagine something that has not yet happened.

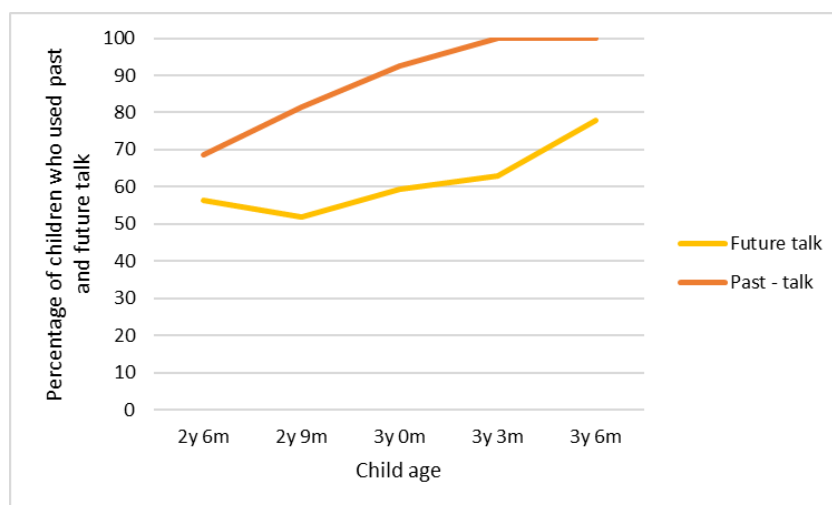


Figure 6:1 Development of Toddler TaLK children's use of past and future talk from 2½ to 3½ years

Children’s past and future talk in practice

Example 1	Interpretation
<p>Jack (2y 6m) and Ariana (2y 6m) are having morning tea. Jack: I <u>was playing</u> over there. Educator: You were playing over there. What were you doing over there? Jack: I <u>was playing</u> my baby. Ariana: I <u>was playing</u> with my blanket. Jack: I <u>was playing</u> with my blanket too.</p>	<p>Jack and Ariana are talking about what they did earlier that day, using past tense (‘was playing’, ‘were doing’). This example of past talk shows the children’s capacity to tell their educator about past events in which the educator did not participate. Jack and the educator do, however, refer to the physical context that they share (‘over there’). This example illustrates children’s growing capacity to “recount events in their life” (EYLF, p. 58, Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators).</p>
<p>Example 2</p> <p>Andrea (2y 6m) and Sam (2y 6m) are playing dress-ups. Andrea: I’ll <u>help</u> you [helping Sam to put on a dress-up top]. Sam: Put on sunglasses. You <u>will see</u> everything yellow.</p>	<p>Interpretation</p> <p>In this play episode, Andrea and Sam are using future talk to plan their next actions (“I’ll help you”) and predict what will happen (“You will see everything yellow”). Such talk can help children extend their play and support connectedness, collaboration and teamwork, which are key values of "secure, respectful and reciprocal relationships" (EYLF, p.14).</p>
<p>Example 3</p> <p>Lucy (3y 6m) is playing with large blocks while talking with her educator. Lucy: Do you know <u>a girl who fell down the monkey bars and then she needed an ambulance?</u> Educator: In the big school? Yes, I know. She fell over the climbing equipment, didn’t she? Because she knocked herself down. Lucy: <u>Why did she knock herself?</u> Educator: Because she fell. Lucy: No, she did this. Educator: She did. Lucy: Do you know, <u>I saw a real, real golden door. It was gold. It was shining up. And then mom knocked it and then it opened.</u></p>	<p>Interpretation</p> <p>Lucy is using past talk to share with her educator first a story she has heard (about a girl in big school) and then one of her own past or possibly imaginary experiences (seeing a golden door). While the young children in the examples above are talking about their own actions in the recent past or immediate future, Lucy here shows capacity to talk about the past experiences of others (even ones she has learned about rather than witnessed) and imaginary stories (‘I saw a real golden door’). Although Lucy briefly refers to the immediate context (‘she did this’), this example demonstrates her ability to use free talk, to ‘retell simple stories in a logical sequence’ (EYLF, p. 60, Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators).</p>

Educators can encourage children to past and future talk by:

- Creating opportunities to have informal and unstructured conversations with young children about their recent experiences. For example, consider the following mealtime conversation:
Educator: I think you had a good time outside this morning. Tell me what you did?
Child: Saskia and me played rockets.
Educator: I saw you! You were using the pipes to make rockets.
Child: And some stones. The stones were the starts.
- Using a combination of open and ‘closed’ yes/no and wh-questions to encourage children to extend their conversations. This helps children to add detail to their story as the topic of free talk usually revolves around young children’s own personal experience.
- Modelling and encouraging children to make predictions and talk about the future (e.g., ‘*Tomorrow I will put out the farm animals with the blocks,*’ ‘*I am going to fly in an airplane next week*’). This includes asking children to think and hypothesise about what may happen in the future (‘*I wonder if we will see the kookaburras again today,*’ ‘*Who do you think is coming to collect you this afternoon?*’).

How does past and future talk support learning in early childhood services?

Past talk enables children to tell stories about their family, culture, countries and communities, which helps them “feel safe, secure and supported” (EYLF, Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identify). Children’s capacity to “retell or create simple stories” and construct artwork “drawing on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander stories” (p. 56) fosters their growth as “confident and involved learners” (EYLF, Outcome 4). Storytelling is an important form of literacy, which children build when they “recount events in their lives” (p. 58) or “retell simple stories in a logical sequence” (p. 60, Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators).

Future talk can support children’s engagement and collaboration in play, helping them plan their next steps and roles with their peers. Future talk helps children express their predictions, which is key for reading comprehension and learning in science. Children’s use of future talk also demonstrates “learning dispositions such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity” (EYLF, p. 51, Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners).

How does past and future talk support learning when children start school?

In subject English, past talk helps children engage in oral storytelling (ENE-OLC-01 Oral language and communication), create written texts that recount events or tell stories (ENE-CWT-01 Creating Written Texts), and demonstrate their understanding and respond to literature by retelling story events (ENE-UARL-01). In History, too, a student in Early Stage 1 ‘communicates stories of their own family heritage and the heritage of others’ (HTE-1).

Future talk can help children demonstrate their skills in oral language (ENE-OLC-01) and reading comprehension (ENE-RECOM-01) (e.g. predicting how a story will develop). Future talk is also key to students’ ability to collaborate in problem-solving and experiments, for example, in science.