

## Learning-oriented talk: Professional learning resource 7

### Topic Extension

#### What is topic extension?

Topic extension talk occurs when children elaborate on the topic of conversation by adding more information that is logically connected to what was said previously. In these conversations, children often make connections between objects or events, ‘grouping’ them together. They volunteer further information that sustains and adds detail to the conversation, often by using words like ‘also’, ‘as well’ and ‘too’ (e.g. Max: *We saw fish in the rock pool.* Alex: *And there was a crab too.*).

By extending a topic, children demonstrate how much they already know about it. In topic extension talk, children add more detail and may use more sophisticated vocabulary, or words that are less frequently used or associated with specific disciplines such as science. This allows children to engage in more sustained interactions, so they have opportunities to build more knowledge about the topic and add new words to their vocabulary.

#### When do children start to use topic extension?

To extend the topic of a conversation, children need to use longer, multi-word statements. It is therefore not surprising that the ability to extend a topic emerges as children approach the age of 3. In the Toddler TaLK study, around 40% of the children used topic extension at 2½ years, but these conversations were relatively short and simple, usually including just one additional piece of information (compare the examples on page 2). By the time the Toddler TaLK children were 3½ years old, nearly 80% were using topic extension, and their conversations were longer, much more detailed, and included multiple topic extensions.

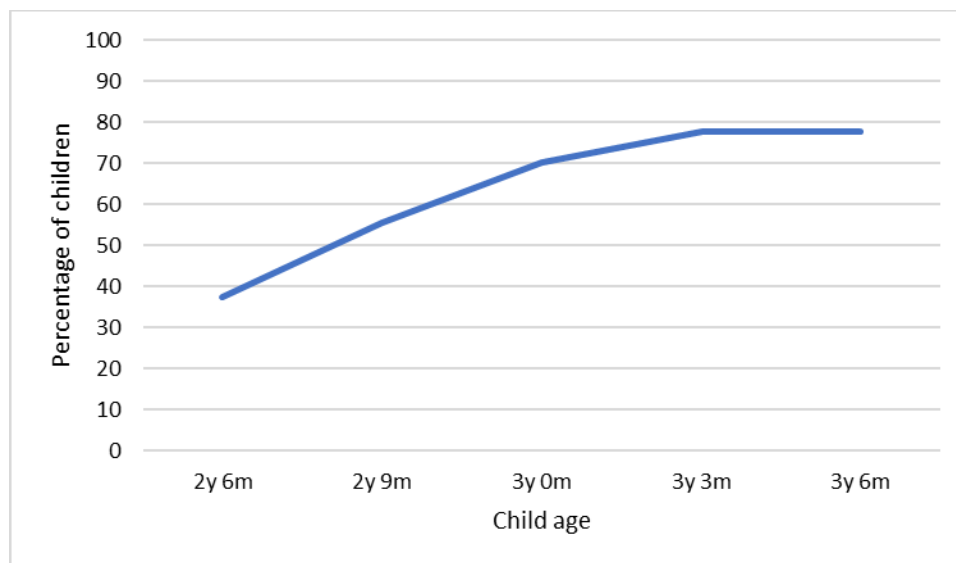


Figure 7:1. Development in Toddler TaLK children’s use of topic extension from 2½ to 3½ years

## Children’s use of topic extension talk in practice

Example 1	Interpretation
<p>Jack (2y 6m) and other children are having lunch.</p> <p>Jack: Hey, is that Bluey on your water bottle? <u>I got that one too.</u></p> <p>Educator: Look, there is a shark on Grace’s water bottle.</p> <p>Jack: <u>And a manta ray.</u></p>	<p>Jack extends the topic of water bottles by first sharing that he too has one with the animation character Bluey on it, and then that Grace’s water bottle has a picture of a manta ray. Such topic extension allows Jack to demonstrate his understanding of the logical connections between certain aspects of experience. Making these connections reveals children’s ‘learning dispositions’, showing that children have “multiple points of view and ways of thinking” (EYLF, p. 67).</p>
Example 2	Interpretation
<p>Max (3y 3m) and the educator share a picture book about birds and animals and discuss Max’s family visit to the zoo.</p> <p>Educator: Did you see the ducks at the park?</p> <p>Max: <u>And a mummy and a baby.</u></p> <p>Educator: You saw lots of them.</p> <p>Max: Yeah.</p> <p>Educator: Yeah.</p> <p>Max: <u>I saw one swimming. I now see the seal show.</u></p> <p>Educator: The seal show? That was at the zoo on the weekend, wasn’t it?</p> <p>Max: Yes. <u>Did you see the shark show?</u></p> <p>Educator: The shark show? I am not sure there is a shark show. I think I might get frightened of the shark show. Did you see the dolphins as well?</p> <p>Max: <u>I now see this one</u> (pointing at the picture book)</p> <p>Educator: Oh, yes, it’s a little book, isn’t it? Let’s see what’s after the yellow duck.</p> <p>‘Yellow duck, yellow duck what do you see? I see a...?’ (pointing at the picture of a horse)</p> <p>Max: <u>A horsey.</u></p>	<p>Max is using topic extension talk to share with his educator what he has seen at the Zoo. Although the educator knows about Max’s family trip to the zoo, note that Max adds much of the information without being prompted. In this conversation, we can observe a few instances of topic extension, which demonstrates the child’s initiative to establish links between the picture book and his family’s visit to the Zoo and to recount past experience. This example of topic extension talk also reflects the child’s “persistence and a positive attitude towards tasks; motivation, associated with enthusiasm and engagement” (p. 67).</p>

### Educators can encourage children to use topic extension by:

- Creating a culture of responsiveness, where children feel comfortable to share their ideas. By getting to know and talking about children’s interests and experiences, educators can prompt them to add more detail to their conversations.
- Asking wh-questions such as ‘what else did you see at the zoo?’ and using prompts such as ‘tell me about the elephants’ to encourage children to add more detail and extend the conversation.

- Encouraging small groups of children to extend a shared topic of interest topic. For example, *'Ella went to the zoo last weekend. Who else has been to a zoo? ... What did you see?'*

## **How does topic extension talk support learning in early childhood services?**

Extending the topics of conversations can reveal children's "learning dispositions: habits of mind that affect how children approach learning" such as "persistence, [...] enthusiasm and engagement; flexibility, associated with consideration of multiple points of view and ways of thinking; ...and making causal connections between people, events and situations" (EYLF, p. 67). By encouraging children to extend conversations educators can help children develop their sense of agency and self-worth (EYLF, Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity) and ability "to transfer and adapt what they have learned from one context to another" (EYLF, p. 55, Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners). Educators are also encouraged to "engage in sustained communication with children about ideas and experiences, and extend their vocabulary" (EYLF, p. 58, Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators).

## **How does topic extension talk support learning when children start school?**

When a child extends the topic of a conversation, they demonstrate their knowledge of vocabulary (ENE-VOCAB-01). This includes words specific to different learning areas such as science, maths, geography and history, and words for describing the shape, size, texture and other qualities of objects and various objects, animals, characters, people and places. Topic extension talk supports children to develop many of the oral language and communication skills (ENE-OLC-01) required for success in the early years of school and beyond. These skills include adding to the comments of others and sharing thoughts and feelings; using language to discuss ideas, persuade others and negotiate relationships; and (re)telling stories. These skills are valuable across all learning areas.