

Learning-oriented talk: Professional learning resource 8

Free Talk

What is ‘free talk’?

Very young children tend to talk about what they see and hear around them. In these ‘here and now’ conversations, a child can use reference words (e.g. ‘this’, ‘that’, ‘here’, ‘there’) and pointing to refer to objects around them (*I want more of that*). As children’s vocabulary and overall language skills expand, they build their capacity to clearly name and describe people, things and events even when these are not present (*It’s my dad’s birthday*). Free talk is not grounded in the ‘here and now’ and can make sense outside the immediate context in which it occurs. Free talk can be about people and objects in more distant times and places (*I have a new puppy at home* or *My brother goes to big school*), about general observations (*All babies cry* or *Cats have tails*) or abstract topics (*Love is when mummy hugs you.*). Free talk also includes talk about events in the past (*Yesterday, I went shopping with dad*) and future (*There will be a party*) (See Resource # 6 about Past and Future Talk).

Free talk lays the foundation for children’s development of writing skills and future academic achievement. Because free talk makes sense without referring to the immediate environment in which it occurs, it is like writing which readers can usually understand from the words written on the page or screen alone. Free talk also provides an entry point to understanding abstract concepts like ‘love’, ‘friendship’ and ‘idea’, alongside maths and science terms such as ‘animal’, ‘liquid’ and ‘pattern’ (See Resource #3).

When do children start to use free talk?

In Toddler TaLK, what we coded as ‘free talk’ excluded past and future talk, which we coded and explained separately (See Resource #6). After they turn 2, children began to incorporate free talk into their conversations. In the Toddler TaLK study, over half of the children were using free talk by the time they were 2½ years old. Free talk emerged a little later than past talk and at about the same time as future talk.

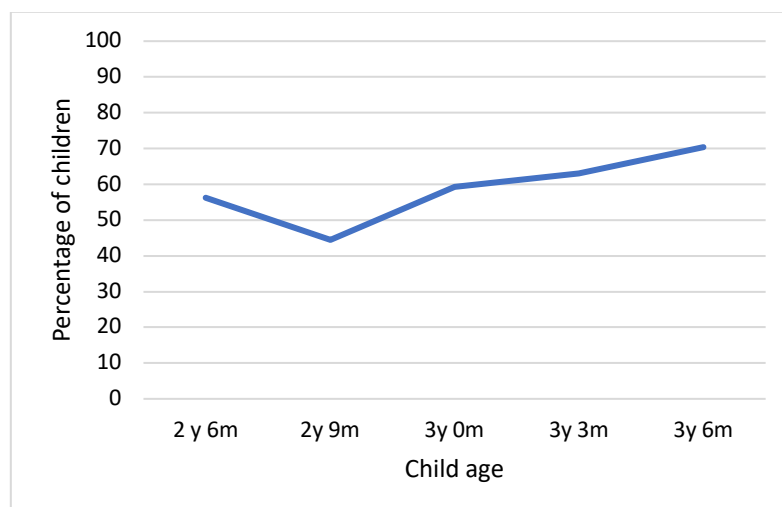


Figure 8:1. Development in Toddler TaLK children’s use of Free talk from 2½ to 3½ years.

Children's use of reasoning talk in practice

Example 1	Interpretation
<p>Erica (2y 6m) is having lunch with other children and her educator. Erica: <u>My mum's got a baby.</u> Educator: Mum's got a baby? Erica: <u>Yes, mum's got a baby in her tummy.</u> Educator: She does have a baby in her tummy, doesn't she? Are you going to have a little brother or a little sister? Erica: <u>A little sister. Oh, hopefully, we don't know, do we? Do you have other sister?</u> Educator: I do. Erica: You do. Hopefully it's another girl. We'll find out next month.</p>	<p>Erica is sharing with her educator the information that her family is expecting a new baby. Erica achieves this without the support of any visual clues or artefacts (e.g. photos, dolls), relying solely on her language skills. This example shows a very young child's capacity to share personal information with someone who may not yet know that information. Sharing such information can help children create emotional bonds with their educators and peers in the early childhood centre. It also helps educators learn more about individual children, which supports children's sense of identity and self-worth (EYLF, Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity) and is "crucial to providing an environment and experiences where all children can participate and will optimise their learning and thinking" (EYLF, p. 50, Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners).</p>
Example 2	Interpretation
<p>Alessandro (3y 6m) is having lunch. He is telling his educator about a popular children's YouTube character Blippi. Educator: Do you play games on your ipad or you watch cartoons? Alessandro: I watch Blippi. Educator: You watch Blippi? Alessandro: Blippi, Blippi, Blippi! Educator: B. L. I. P. Alessandro: P. I. Blippi! Like that. Only one Blippi. Educator: Did you watch Blippi driving a forklift? Alessandro: No, I watched Blippi feeding a bear in the Zoo.</p>	<p>Alessandro is talking about a popular character Blippi. Even without prompts, Alessandro seems confident to share information about the character alongside using literacy talk (spelling) (see Resouce #3) and past talk (<i>I watched Blippi...</i>). Free talk can reveal "what captures [children's] curiosity and interests" and is a means for children to "bring their <i>being</i> to their learning." (EYLF, p. 50, Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners).</p>

Educators can encourage children to use free talk by:

- Explicitly labelling objects in conversations with children (e.g., *Do you want more milk?*, rather than *Do you want more?*; *Let's look for the book in the basket,* rather than *Let's see if it's over there*). This extends children's vocabulary, which is essential for being able to talk about non-present objects, people, places and events.
- Encouraging children to share and compare their experiences, observations and things they have learned from books, films or TV.
- Asking questions that encourage children to make general statements and categorise things (e.g. *Do you think all cats like fish? What are some kinds of healthy food?*).

- During shared reading, prompting children to make connections to other texts and to their own experiences (*They made a cherry cake for Bear’s birthday. Did you have a cake on your birthday? What kind of cake was it?*).
- Inviting children to talk about places, objects and experiences outside the ‘here and now’ (e.g. going to school; travelling on an airplane).

How does free talk support learning in early childhood services?

- By encouraging children to use free talk in order to express their personal interests and experiences (from outside the early childhood centre), educators “acknowledge each child’s family, culture and individual uniqueness in positive ways” (EYLF, p. 34, Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity).
- Sharing of personal experiences would support children “to begin to recognise that there is a diversity of cultures, traditions and family structures” (EYLF, p. 39, Outcome 2: Children are connected with and contribute to their world).
- Free talk can help children learn and generalise about safe and unsafe behaviours, healthy and unhealthy food and about people’s feelings and relationships (EYLF, Outcome 3: Children have a strong sense of wellbeing).
- Through free talk, children can share information about themselves and reveal “learning dispositions such as curiosity, cooperation, confidence, creativity, commitment, enthusiasm, persistence, imagination and reflexivity” (EYLF, p. 51). Through free talk, children can express “predictions and generalisations about their daily activities, aspects of the natural world and environment” (EYLF, p. 53) and “make connections between experiences, concepts and processes” (EYLF, p. 54, Outcome 4: Children are confident and involved learners).
- Children’s ability to engage in free talk can be supported through talk about texts, including relating texts to their own experiences and life outside the early childhood centre (EYLF, Outcome 5: Children are effective communicators).

How does free talk support learning when children start school?

To engage in free talk, children need to have strong knowledge of vocabulary so they can refer to and provide detail about objects, events, people and experiences that are not present (ENE-VOCAB-01). Supporting children to engage in free talk helps them develop the oral language and communication skills (ENE-OLC-01) required for success in the early years of school and beyond. These skills are especially important for developing knowledge about things, events and abstract concepts that cannot be accessed through direct, hands-on experience and observation (for example, learning about volcanoes or how different types of rocks are formed in primary school, or learning about democracy in later years). Free talk also helps children achieve a range of purposes in everyday communication such as sharing their thoughts and demonstrating what they know about the world beyond the immediate situation in which a conversation takes place and using language to discuss ideas and persuade others.