

# Toddlers' Learning-Oriented Talk:

## Setting the Scene

### About the Toddler TaLK study

In the research project Toddler TaLK (Talk-Learn-Know), we examined young children's talk at their early childhood centres. We observed when children begin using 'learning-oriented talk', that is, using language to demonstrate and build new knowledge. We also found how children's use of learning-oriented talk progressed in the course of one year, from 2½ to 3½ years of age.

We invited five centres in Sydney and regional NSW to participate in the study and observed 27 children across these centres. We visited each centre five times per child, once every three months. Each time, we filmed one focus child during play and mealtime. Filming started when all the children were 2½ and concluded when they were 3½ years of age. During the visits, we asked children and educators to do everything what they would normally do in their rooms. We examined the collected videos, and our analysis showed how often the children used specific language features that we interpret as learning-oriented talk.

As an outcome of this study, we produced **nine resources to help educators to create a language-rich learning environment**. These resources will build an understanding of different types of learning-oriented talk; its features and how it is evident in practice. Each resource also includes practical strategies as well as links to the EYLF and early stage one school curriculum. We also developed **a practical observation and planning tool** that educators can use to document, interpret and plan from their observations of children's use of learning-oriented talk.

### What is learning-oriented talk?

Learning-oriented talk allows children to learn. For young children, learning involves both demonstrating what they already know and building new knowledge. Learning-oriented talk also tends to involve using 'literacy-oriented', or 'decontextualised', language. Unlike casual, face-to-face interactions, where we can refer to things we can see, touch or hear around us, learning-oriented talk often needs to be sufficiently clear on its own, like written texts. Learning-oriented talk thus provides a very important base for children's future academic skills of reading and writing

In interactions with others, children learn by using:

- questions used to seek information or explanations (**Resource #1**)
- cognitive state talk, which enables children to talk about their own and other people's thoughts, feelings and perspectives (**Resource #2**)

- talk associated with different curriculum areas such as science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) (Resource #3) or literacy (Resource #4)
- reasoning talk, which employs language for explaining, reasoning and hypothesising (Resource #5)
- talk about past and future events (Resource #6)
- topic extension, or providing more detail on a given topic (Resource #7), and
- ‘free talk’, which is about things, people, places and events outside the setting in which a conversation takes place (Resource #8)

## Why is learning-oriented talk important for young children’s learning?

Learning is an on-going exploration that expands children’s intellectual capacity. According to one of the most influential language development and education theorists, Michael Halliday, when young children engage in interactions with others, they learn language, learn through language and learn about language. Language is thus an important tool for learning. This means that educators can start to encourage toddlers to participate in conversations initiated for educational purposes and use learning-oriented talk, which includes asking and responding to questions, sharing information about past and future events, using maths, science and literacy vocabulary.

## Children’s use of learning-oriented talk in practice

The following conversation between Jayden and his educator includes various types of learning-oriented talk. Some of these are identified in square brackets below.

*Jayden (3y 6m) and his educator are sitting at the craft table. Jayden has his drawing in front of him.*

Jayden: Aeroplane.

Educator: Aeroplane. Where is the aeroplane again?

Jayden: This one from Singapore (pointing at his drawing).

Educator: Singapore is not far from Australia. Or is it very far?

Jayden: Singapore is very far from Australia. [Maths and Science talk] And you need to sit in an airplane. [Topic extension]

Educator: Can you drive there by car?

Jayden: No.

Educator: What do you need to go on an aeroplane? What do you need to do first?

Jayden: You need to drive to where aeroplanes live so you can sit on an aeroplane to go up to the sky. [Reasoning talk]

Educator: Where do the aeroplanes live? How is this place called?

Jayden: Singapore aeroplane shop.

Educator: What about Sydney?

Jayden: Sydney is far away from Singapore. [Maths and Science talk]

Educator: Yeah, you need to fly across the sea.

Jayden: If you go in the sea, the shark will eat your car.

Educator: What about if you go by boat? Possible?

Jayden: There will be big waves and you will be stuck. [Reasoning talk; Future talk] And you will be seasick. [Future talk; Topic extension]

Educator: You will be seasick. That is true.

Jayden: You will be seasick in the sea. [Future talk] And you can go under the water. [Topic extension] That's why you need to go on an aeroplane. [Reasoning talk]

Educator: How many hours do you need to fly in the airplane?

Jayden: Eight hours. [Maths and Science talk]

Educator: Is it the whole day or half a day?

Jayden: I don't know. [Cognitive state talk] A big day. Did you go to Singapore? [Yes/No Information seeking question]

Educator: I've been to Singapore once.

Jayden: I did once too. [Topic extension]

Educator: Did you go to Singapore once or a few times?

Jayden: A few times. [Maths and Science talk]

Educator: What do you usually do in Singapore? You go to the playground, to the swimming pool. What else do you do?

Jayden: I do. Once I was in Singapore and I got lost in the lift. [Past talk]

Educator: What happened?

Jayden: Once the lift stopped, the door opened and nobody walking around. I was alone and I pressed the button to go down [Past talk; Free talk] so I can see my mummy and daddy. [Reasoning talk]

## What did the study find?

We found that learning-oriented talk promotes learning through the following features observable in the language of children as young as 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> year of age:

- Questions (Resource #1)
- Cognitive state talk (Resource #2)
- Maths and Science talk (Resource #3)
- Literacy talk (Resource #4)
- Reasoning talk (Resource #5)
- Past and Future talk (Resource #6)
- Topic extension talk (Resource #7)
- Free talk (Resource #8)