

Small Talk—Engaging Children Who Have Communication Needs

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Communication is nearly always the foremost concern of parents and teachers of children with special needs, regardless of the type of disability a child might have. For most children, talking is just “doing what comes naturally.” The ability to express what’s important to them develops smoothly and easily. But what happens when talking does not come as naturally?

In most classrooms, the more children listen, the less they talk. Therefore, it’s important to allow time for children to carry on conversations with adults and peers. Remember, too, that opportunities for children’s conversations occur throughout the day in a High/Scope program.

Here are some ideas for supporting children’s language. They are helpful for all children, but particularly those with special communication needs:

✓ **Encourage natural conversation.** Often work time is considered *the* time for choice, play, and talking. But children will have more to say if freedom of expression is encouraged during all parts of the daily routine. By conversing naturally with others, both in groups and one-on-one with peers or adults, children develop trust and a sense of security. We have found that when we encourage spontaneous language rather than try to elicit a specific response from children, children’s language becomes richer and more varied, and their sentences longer and more complex.

Outside of work time, snack time is one of the most important settings for conversation. It’s important to allow snack time to be a family-like experience where adults and children share in the talk.

✓ **“Talk” for children.** Providing some of the language for young children who are nonverbal allows them to be

part of the conversation. Consider the following example:

At snack time, the conversation turned to the pets we have at home. The children were discussing all the kinds of animals they had. Jason, who could speak only a few words, was part of the group. In the conversation, the teacher mentioned to the group that Jason had two dogs at his home. Jason smiled.

By commenting for Jason, the teacher included him in the conversation. This is also a strategy we use during conflict resolution with children with limited language. We might say “Sam, you look upset because you want the truck, and Jason, you are crying because you want the truck, too.” By providing some of the words for children’s needs, problems, and feelings, we allow children whose language skills are limited to be a part of the problem-solving process.

✓ **Use concrete objects.** Seeing and holding objects and materials often enables children with special needs to relate to certain parts of the routine, such as planning or recall times. For example:

Initially, Mary had a difficult time planning. To help her understand planning, we had her take the teacher to the area she chose. The teacher would then state her plan for her: “You planned to play with the blocks.” As Mary became more familiar with planning, the teachers brought objects from the areas to the table for her to choose from. She would then choose an item representing the area she wanted to play in, and often played with the article itself. Eventually, Mary made her own verbal plans.

✓ **Use plenty of repetition.** All preschoolers love repetition, and for children with special needs, this can be especially helpful for learning. Many books repeat single phrases or sounds, such as “Brown Bear, Brown Bear, what do you



For all children, trusting relationships set the stage for learning.

see?” Such repetition helps children to anticipate what comes next and to become familiar with the story. Eventually they will begin to use the repeated phrases themselves, as in this example:

In our class, the children loved a book about a crocodile. They chose to hear it daily. By midyear, most of the children could anticipate the sequence of the story and could fill in the words. Some were even acting out the story and

adding their own comments.

✓ **Communicate in the context of trusting relationships.**

While this is a fundamental principle in all High/Scope programs, it is especially important for children with disabilities. Children with speech difficulties often recognize, at an early age, that they have special challenges. Therefore it is crucial to develop a relationship that is nonjudgmental and focused on the *child* rather than on goals and objectives. Consider this story:

Roberto, a child with Down syndrome, attended our class a few years ago. We often became frustrated because Roberto would not talk to either of us, yet our classroom assistants were having great success. After having the High/Scope training, we realized that Roberto sensed that every time we wanted to talk to him, we had a hidden agenda. (We were so focused on Roberto’s special education objectives it was difficult for us to be spontaneous). On the other hand, we noticed that our assistants had developed a playful, trusting relationship with Roberto. We then began to play with him without demands or expectations. It took a long time, but we were able to change our relationship with Roberto and had many ongoing exchanges that supported his development.

By using concrete objects, repetition, and a variety of language and interaction strategies we can encourage children’s development as communicators. If we capitalize on natural opportunities for conversation, using trust as a catalyst, we can give children success and help them attain their intrinsic desire to communicate. ■