

Everyday Conversations

How They Help Your Child Become a Strong Reader



By Natalie Wexler

When my son Sam was about three, we had something like the following conversation in the kitchen, near the back door of our house.

Sam: Why did you lock the door?

Me: So people can't get in.

Sam: Why?

Me: Well, they might take something.

Sam: Why?

Me: I don't know, they might not have some things they need.

Sam: Why?

Me: Maybe they don't have much money.

Sam: Why?

Me: Well, maybe they don't have jobs.

Sam: Why?

At the time, I wasn't thrilled about all these questions: How do you explain crime, poverty, and unemployment to a three-year-old? But I now realize that this back and forth was an important part of my son's education. I won't say that it led to his current job as a public defender, but I'm confident that conversations like this—we had many—were crucial to the language skills and vocabulary that helped him understand what he was expected to read and learn in school.

For children to become strong readers, they need to learn a huge number of words—at least 100,000 by the time they get to eighth grade.¹ It's impossible to teach that much vocabulary directly; children gain most of their vocabulary indirectly, as their knowledge of the world expands.² Much of this learning happens through conversations and read-alouds. So parents and caregivers play a crucial role in giving their children access to the vocabulary, complex sentence structure, and knowledge they need to be successful, beginning at birth.³

Conversational Turns

One way of helping your child become a confident reader is simply to engage in back-and-forth conversations like the one I had with my son. Studies have found that children's development is closely

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY SIMONA MULAZZANI

linked to the number of “conversational turns” they experience.⁴ Conversational turns happen when an adult speaks and a child responds, or vice versa—like a game of Ping-Pong. The “conversation” doesn’t even have to use words. Even if your baby just coos or your toddler makes up words—and you respond—it counts.⁵

Everyday activities provide lots of opportunities to engage in conversational turns. In the supermarket, for example, you can have dialogues about different kinds of apples or where milk comes from. At home, when your child is playing with blocks or dolls, you can comment on what they’re doing.

But studies have shown that certain kinds of interactions are more powerful than others.⁶ In powerful conversations, you provide

- words for actions and objects that interest your child (“Yes, that’s a bird singing up there in the tree”);
- familiar routines and repeated language, making the words predictable and easier to learn (like playing peekaboo before bedtime); and
- lots of opportunities for taking turns, participating equally, and generally enjoying yourselves.

It’s also a good idea to follow your child’s interests, letting them take the lead.

Read-Alouds

Conversations with children—important as they are—aren’t enough to equip them to become good readers. It’s also crucial to read aloud to kids. That won’t teach a child how to read, or “decode,” written words; most children will need systematic instruction from well-trained teachers to be able to do that.* But reading aloud to children can build the kind of knowledge and vocabulary they need to *understand* the written texts they’ll be expected to read in school—and in life.

Why isn’t conversation enough? Written language is more complex than spoken language.⁷ Writers use words that don’t generally appear in conversation—like *despite* or *moreover*—and they use a lot more words. And writers don’t explain every word or phrase they use (because their writing wouldn’t be much fun to read if they did). Instead, they assume readers know what most of the words mean.

The structure of sentences in written language is also more complex than those we use in conversation. Written sentences tend to be longer, sometimes using unclear pronouns, passive verbs, and lots of subordinate clauses. If you’re not familiar with that kind of sentence structure, it can be hard to make sense of a text even if you can read and understand the individual words.⁸

Children can learn a lot from books even before they’re able to talk—especially if they have a caring adult to guide them. If you’re showing your child a picture book, you can point to the pictures and say the names of the objects they depict. And after your child learns to read, it’s important to continue reading aloud: in addition to being a nice way to spend time together, it’s a way to introduce your child to vocabulary and concepts in books they can’t yet read independently. Researchers have found that children’s listening comprehension exceeds their reading comprehension through about age 13, on average.⁹

*For tips on helping your child learn foundational reading skills, see the article by Nell K. Duke on page 14.

Conversational Read-Alouds

Even better than just reading aloud is to *combine* it with conversational turns. Asking and answering questions about a book you’re reading together is a great way to help your child understand and remember the new concepts and vocabulary in the text. You might ask what your child thinks is going to happen next in a story, or why a character behaved in a certain way.

Better yet is to read a series of books on the same general topic—maybe sea mammals, airplanes, or the solar system. It’s definitely worthwhile to read fiction and poetry, but books that convey information about the world have the most potential to build the kind of knowledge that fuels reading comprehension. And children usually need to hear the same concepts and vocabulary repeatedly in different contexts to truly understand and remember them.

These don’t have to be dry, informational books—although kids can actually get very interested in those. Both children and adults tend to find it easier to understand and retain information from stories,¹⁰ but those stories don’t have to be made up. Children can learn a lot about science from a biography of a scientist, for example. And history is basically a series of stories; kids can find history fascinating if it’s presented in an engaging way. If you’re not sure what books would be right for your child, ask a librarian for suggestions.

If your child shows a particular interest in a topic, it’s also a great idea to nurture that interest by going beyond books. If your child is fascinated by sharks, maybe you can find an aquarium to visit. If your child’s passion is for something more easily available, like insects or rocks, a walk in a park could be a rich educational experience. Just remember the importance of those conversational turns: ask and answer questions about what you’re seeing, ideally connecting them to books you’ve read together.

There may be times when you don’t feel like answering your child’s questions—as I did when I was just trying to lock our back door. And of course it’s not always possible to stop whatever you’re doing and read a book or engage in a conversational turn. But it’s important to remember that having back-and-forth exchanges with young children, exposing them to the complexity of written language, and feeding their natural curiosity will put them on the path to becoming successful readers and learners. □

For the endnotes, see aft.org/ae/fall2023/wexler.

