

Focus of your attention

Holding quality conversations in a busy setting environment is a big challenge. Here, Michael Jones explores practical ways that practitioners can involve young children in sustained shared thinking.

YOUNG CHILDREN learn most effectively when they are able to be involved in high quality conversations with adults. When settings are inspected, judgements that are made about the effectiveness of children's learning, and social and emotional development, will be based on observations about the types of conversations that staff and children are involved in. This will include evidence of sustained shared thinking.

The concept of sustained shared thinking developed from the findings of the *Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project* (EPPE). The study looked at 3,000 children in 141 settings. Certain settings were found to be more effective than others, in terms of enabling children's progress in learning. A key factor in their effectiveness was the types of conversations that adults and children were involved in.

Analysis of these conversations showed that the adults had enough time to encourage children to talk in-depth about their ideas, and that the adults were sensitive and thoughtful in the way that they responded to children. This increased children's knowledge and understanding of what was being talked about.

Researchers noted that these types of detailed conversations were enjoyable for both the adult and the child, though they acknowledged that examples of sustained shared thinking were relatively rare.

Adults' concentration

As part of the Every Child a Talker project (ECaT), and over the past few years, I have been exploring with practitioner colleagues ways that we can have regular quality conversations with young children. I define a 'quality conversation' as taking place when adults and children are focused on the same idea and explore it through taking turns to talk and listen to each other.

Observations and experience showed that in busy settings, despite significant background noise, children can concentrate surprisingly well. This is particularly true if children are excited about what they are talking about.

Practitioners, on the other hand, often find it very difficult to give their full attention to what children are trying to say. As we would expect, this is particularly the case when the adult to child ratio

is high – for example, in a reception class where there may be as many as 30 children and two adults. However, even when the ratio is low, adults still find it difficult to focus on talking with children.

Practitioners give three main reasons for their lack of focus:

- 'We are expected to share our attention with as many children as possible.'
- 'We need to record as accurately as possible what we are talking about.'
- 'We are constantly interrupted by other children.'

Some adults feel that they should be constantly scanning the room to make sure that they are available when problems arise – for example, if two children have an argument on the other side of the room.

In this case the adult might call across the room to give instructions to the children, or ask a colleague to sort the problem out. The child who is trying to hold a conversation will often be very aware that the adult is not able or willing to give him her full attention.

From my experience, children who are less confident about talking often give up and move away if they feel that they are not able to keep an adult fully focused. Children with language delay, or very shy and quiet children, or those learning English as an additional language, find it particularly difficult to compete for an adult's attention when their conversation is interrupted by children who are more confident talkers.

Recording conversations

It is important to keep a record of what children say, particularly if what they are talking about shows something new about their thinking or language development. However, many practitioners feel that they need to write down everything that is said, word-for-word, as the child says it.

Children are very aware that adults who behave in this way are not fully focused on what the child is



Michael Jones

provides training on language development in the early years. Visit www.talk4meaning.co.uk for more details

From my experience, children who are less confident about talking often give up and move away if they feel that they are not able to keep an adult fully focused

trying to explain. It is also highly unnatural, and can inhibit children from getting involved in the types of detailed conversations that they need and enjoy.

An adult who is constantly interrupted, who feels she should be keeping an eye on what other children are doing while taking notes, is an adult under pressure. This pressure is often communicated to the children, and conversations become short and functional, and not very enjoyable. In other words, they are the opposite of 'sustained shared thinking'.

Sharing books

Having discovered the barriers to effective conversation, we set about exploring how to help adults and children enjoy talking with each other, to explore ideas and promote learning. One focus was how we shared books with children.

Book sharing, where an adult and child take time to choose a book and talk about it, can be one of the best ways to develop meaningful conversations. If we know what children are interested in, we can put together a collection of fiction and non-fiction books based round a theme.

If a book is interesting enough, or the child is already familiar with it, we can gain some fascinating insights into children's thinking. For example, one child's mother was expecting a baby, and several children had baby brothers and sisters at home. We set up an 'instant book area' with a quilt, four realistic-looking baby dolls and a basket of fiction and non-fiction books about babies. A key piece of equipment was a set of six small chairs that were comfortable for adults and children to sit on.

Planning for conversation

Our first action was to plan for an adult to remain in the space for a minimum of 45 minutes. This meant that this adult had no other responsibilities in the room apart from talking with children and sharing books. In order to do this, another adult was designated as the 'room supervisor'. Her job was to move around the room and have shorter, less-involved conversations with children, and supervise what they were doing.

Teachers, in particular, found it very difficult not to divide their attention between the children in the book area and what was happening in other parts of



courtesy of Michael Jones

Having an adult whose time is dedicated to one space, means that they have no other responsibilities that might divide their attention

the room. They explained that during their training they were taught to keep an eye on the whole room at all times. In many cases, the only way to help them to truly focus on book sharing was to ask them to turn their back on the rest of the class!

This was entirely justified, as long as the other adults were fully involved in their supervisory roles. This was an important piece of non-verbal behaviour that gave the children in the book area the important message, 'I am fully focused on listening to what you have to say'.

Managing interruptions

An adult staying in an exciting area is bound to attract several children. We were prepared for interruptions from children who were keen to take part. If a child wanted to join in sharing the book, the adult would say: 'Jessica and I are finding out about babies. Would you like to listen to what we are talking about?' If the child agreed, then he could sit on a chair and join in.

This worked well with up to three children, because each child could listen and contribute ideas without feeling that they were competing with each other for the adult's attention. If more children wanted to join in, the adult would say: 'It's Jessica's turn now. You can play with the babies and share a book with your friend while you are waiting. When Jessica has finished, then it will be your turn.'

If a child approached with a problem – for example, if he had paint on his hands, then the adult could briefly direct him to the supervising adult and carry on with her conversation.

Sustained conversations and recording

If an idea or a book is interesting enough, children will want to return to it again and again. Costas, for example, knew that there was a baby in his mummy's tummy, but could not understand why the food she ate did not land on the baby's head.

Having had this fascinating conversation, the practitioner mentioned it to Costas' mother, who talked to him about it at home. The practitioner, meanwhile, found a children's non-fiction book that explained pregnancy and birth, and over the next few days she and other colleagues were able to talk with Costas about this and the many other questions he had about the subject.

In this way, the conversation was 'sustained' and helped Costas explore an interesting idea and develop his learning. The adults found this topic fascinating too! As a result they had no difficulty in remembering what they and Costas had discussed when they made notes and observations later. **eye**

Useful resources

- *Talking and Learning with Young Children* by Michael Jones. Published by Sage (ISBN: 9781473912403).

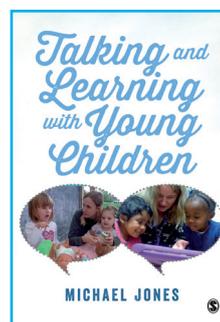


If an idea is interesting enough, children will want to return to it again and again

- *Sustained Shared Thinking in the Early Years* by Kathy Brodie. Published by Routledge (ISBN: 9780415713436).
- *Supporting Young Children's Sustained Shared Thinking* by Marion Dowling. DVD published by Early Education (ASIN: B00XNJTFZQ).

Reader offer

SAGE Publications is offering **eye** readers a 25 percent discount of Michael Jones' latest book, *Talking and Learning with Young Children* (see Review on page 46 of the March 2016 issue).



You can order the book via www.sagepublications.com or by calling 020 73248500 and quoting the following code: UK16AUTHOR (valid until the end of 2016).

Key points

- The EPPE research revealed that a key factor in a setting's effectiveness was the types of conversations that adults and children were involved in
- Analysis of these conversations showed that the adults had enough time to encourage children to talk in-depth about their ideas, and that the adults were sensitive and thoughtful in the way that they responded to children
- Adults cannot support this sustained shared thinking if their attention is divided