

How practitioners can encourage talk

All parents wish to do their best for their children, but sometimes they lack the confidence or knowledge to implement powerful parenting practices, such as attentive listening, singing songs, playing rhyming games and sharing books. They may not know how important (and easy) this is.

Below are three ways early years practitioners can help parents and carers understand the value and pleasure gained from talking to their young child.

Modelling

Practitioners should take every opportunity to model effective communication techniques to use with children, such as using eye-contact, listening carefully and allowing time for the child to respond. Show parents how allowing 15-30 seconds for a child to respond to a question can help the child respond.

Practitioners can talk with children in front of their parents, during drop-off or pick-up times, for example. This can often be enough to get parents involved in trying things for themselves.

Holding a parents' evening or running a parenting course

Another way to inform parents and carers of the importance of early communication is to hold a parents' evening or course.

How can you attract parents to these sessions? One way is to start by offering parents something they want to know, and building from there. A UK study involving parents of children under five found that the most prominent information need was child health information (91%), followed by information about child care (86%) and child development (80%) (Nicholas and Marden, 1998). A US study of parents' preferences regarding parenting education found that when asked to rate 15 parenting topics, 95% of respondents indicated most interest in "building your child's self-esteem" (Jacobson and Engelbrecht, 2000). Any session on building children's confidence will lead naturally to early communication, as the ability to communicate is the basis of social and emotional well-being.

Practitioners could begin by hosting a session for parents on matters they are concerned about, like crying. Then invite parents to come for a longer session based on home learning environment activities. Sure Start speech and language therapists often use baby massage to attract parents and then introduce a few songs and tips on talking and bonding once everyone is relaxed.

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Practitioners might also consider running a course on something of greater interest to parents and children such as drama or music classes. Research has shown that parents with low levels of confidence, or with the greatest learning needs, are more likely to take part in practical activities that do not involve any reading or writing, such as drama, crafts, music or gardening projects. And any activity that involves parents and children doing things together is a great way to help develop talking skills, and an excellent opportunity for practitioners to model good communication.

Fathers are more likely to get involved in parenting courses or activities if there is a clear strategy to involve and consult them. Dads also enjoy being taught how to share books and tell stories. Holding events like sport or outdoor games, can help to get dads along too.

Send a newsletter

Sending out a newsletter with suggested "talking points" based on a current theme, or sending home information leaflets with tips to help children's talking and listening skills, will also help parents think about the issue. The National Literacy Trust has produced a series of quick tips for parents and practitioners, which have been translated into 17 languages. Topics include dummies, songs and rhymes, play, sharing books, television, talking together, bilingualism and the social newborn. The tips can be downloaded from our website and photocopied free of charge.

The National Literacy Trust has several programmes to help you engage parents – have a look at Early Words Together on the charity's website.

Originally created for Talk to Your Baby with research drawn from Netherley Valley Sure Start.