



Scene of Kyle, a child with Autism, playing with trains

NARRATOR: This is Kyle. Kyle struggles to express himself, to use words to talk about his thoughts and feelings. But he's determined, and like all children, he has something to say.

Scene of Kyle with Teacher Sherrie

KYLE: Telephone! Telephone!

TEACHER SHERRIE: The telephone? Who should answer it?

KYLE: There's the telephone, please.

TEACHER SHERRIE: There's the telephone, please? Should I answer it? Okay. Hello!

KYLE: Yes.

NARRATOR: In spite of his difficulties, he gets his message out, and Sherrie encourages him with her response.

TEACHER SHERRIE: Who is it?

KYLE: This is Kyle.

TEACHER SHERRIE: You are Kyle. This is Teacher Sherrie.

TEACHER SHERRIE: Hi Kyle. I am happy to talk to you.

NARRATOR: They are having a conversation! And Kyle is so excited by his success, he can hardly stand still!

KYLE: Bye Bye.

TEACHER SHERRIE: Bye Bye.

NARRATOR: As simple as this interaction seems, for Kyle it is a big step. And his teachers have worked hard to help him get there. Why? Because they know that helping children use language to communicate with others is one of their most important jobs.

Cassie Andersen, Special Education Teacher

TEACHER CASSIE: Language is how we communicate, in our world. Language is what helps you to build relationships with people and having positive relationships with people around you is key to a happy and productive life. And of course it's the building block to reading.

Interview with Dia Norris, Speech Language Pathologist

DIA NORRIS: Language is fun! Human interaction is the best thing we have going and if you can't communicate, it's difficult to play on the playground, and it's difficult to have good relationships.

Scenes of children playing

NARRATOR: Clearly we want all our children to become successful and effective communicators. But what can we do to help them improve?

Experienced teachers know that one of the best ways for children to learn and practice expressive language is by participating in conversations.



Scenes of children of all backgrounds, culturally and developmentally, conversing

NARRATOR: Conversations give children a chance to practice a wide range of communication skills. Like how to get someone's attention... How to make eye contact and express interest... They're learning to organize their thoughts and find words to express those thoughts. They're practicing taking turns. Staying on topic. Processing new information and formulating a response.

Scene of two boys talking

CHRISTOPHER: Okay do you have anything to for the feast tomorrow?

MICHAEL: Uh, no.

CHRISTOPHER: Maybe you could bring some chocolate.

NARRATOR: Conversations give us the opportunity to help children work on all sorts of communication skills. But it's not always easy to draw a child in to conversations.

Scene of Teacher Cassie with Nicholas

TEACHER CASSIE: So I noticed all the kids went somewhere. Where did you go?

Nicholas looks uncomfortable and walks away.

NARRATOR: What can we do and say to help children make the most of these valuable learning opportunities?

In this program, we'll learn three techniques that can help us engage children in successful conversations. No matter where children are in their language skills, we can help each child make progress by:

- Making a connection
- Finding the child's topic, and
- Inviting a response.

Let's take a closer look at each of these techniques.

Make a Connection

Scene of Teacher Jennifer in a multi-lingual classroom

NARRATOR: Jennifer is substituting in this multi-language classroom today. The fact that she doesn't speak Spanish is only part of her challenge. Far bigger is that she doesn't know the children and they don't know her.

Jennifer knows she can't expect to walk up to children and get them talking. She has to make a connection, help them feel comfortable. Watch how she does this.

Teacher Jennifer with Spanish-speaking children at the tactile table

TEACHER JENNIFER: Do you want to use it?

HISPANIC GIRL: You cook too.

TEACHER JENNIFER: In this one?

HISPANIC GIRL: Yes.

TEACHER JENNIFER: Okay, I'll cook.

NARRATOR: She gets down to their level. She makes eye contact, smiles, shows interest in what they're doing. She listens.

Did you notice what else Jennifer does to connect? She plays! Jennifer simply joins in - playing the way they are playing - paralleling what they are doing.

DIA NORRIS: For some children it's threatening to try to engage directly. But if you play with it, and you're having a good time with it, then a lot of times the same child who's hesitant to engage will initiate that engagement because they're so curious about what you're doing.

Scenes of Teacher Jennifer playing with children speaking English and Spanish

NARRATOR: By joining their play, being close and showing interest, Jennifer creates a special connection. And this connection makes the children want to talk with her, in whatever way they can.

Children speak in Spanish to Jennifer; she nods and smiles.

Scene of Teacher Karissa hugging lots of children

NARRATOR: Most children welcome a connection. It feels good to them! And our attention and interest makes them want to interact further.

GIRL WITH CUTE HAIRDO: Do you like my puffs?

TEACHER KARISSA: Your little puffs? Your little afro puffs. I do. I like those a lot.

Scene of Tanner, a child with Autism, crying and rocking back and forth

NARRATOR: But there are a few children who don't welcome our attempts to connect. They don't know how. And with children like these, building a connection can require a lot of time and persistence.

TEACHER SHERRIE: When he first came, he cried the first couple weeks.

NARRATOR: For Tanner, conversations were clearly a long way off, but his teachers knew that making a connection with him was the first step.

TEACHER CASSIE: Building a one-on-one relationship with a child is the important part. Because it's amazing what kids will do for somebody they think cares about them. And they'll be willing to take a lot more risks, if they feel that bond.

Scene of Teacher Cassie, Tanner and Josh

TEACHER CASSIE: Whoa! (Stops Josh from running into Tanner with his walker)

TANNER: Whoa.

TEACHER CASSIE: Are you okay. We brought you a chicken. (plastic toy) Chicken. And there's a cat. You've got the cat and Josh has the hat.

NARRATOR: Cassie and Sherrie spent much of the year simply being close to Tanner, paying attention, showing they cared. And slowly, Tanner learned to do the same.

Scenes of Tanner interacting with his teachers, and reaching out to say hello

NARRATOR: Now he knows that connecting feels good, and that he can do it to! He makes eye contact, responds to those around him, and engages in back and forth exchanges. He's on his way to conversations!

Scene of Sherrie and Tanner playing with peas

TANNER: Wa Wa

TEACHER SHERRIE: Does water come in there some times? Shall we hang it? Shall we hang it, Tanner? It goes up here. Hang it.

Interview with Sherrie

He was loving it. So we were able to get lots of back and forth with him. But you know, there was really a connection there.

Finding the Child's Topic

NARRATOR: Once we've made a connection, we need to find a topic that will interest the child. Every once in a while, we stumble upon a topic that causes even the shyest child to overflow with conversation.

Scene of Teacher Jennifer with Zane, an Hispanic boy.

TEACHER JENNIFER: What did we do at that farm?

ZANE: A pumpkin pie

TEACHER JENNIFER: Did you have one piece of the pumpkin pie?

ZANE: No. I don't like it. I don't like it.

TEACHER JENNIFER: Oh, you don't like it.

ZANE: No. My daddy likes it. Daddy likes it.

TEACHER JENNIFER: Your daddy likes.

ZANE: (*continues to chatter about pumpkin pie*) Pumpkin pie. Pumpkin pie. Pumpkin pie.

Scene of Teacher Angelica with Alaa

NARRATOR: But we've all had conversations that looked more like this.

TEACHER ANGELICA: How was your weekend, Nalah. Good?

ALAA: (Nods her head and looks away, ending the conversation.)

NARRATOR: So how do we find a topic that's most likely to draw a child in to conversation?

Interview with Karissa

TEACHER KARISSA: Lot of times what I do is just sit back and watch them play. Just find out what their interests are.

NARRATOR: Karissa knows that she doesn't need to create a topic at all. The child already has one. It's whatever has captured his attention and interest. What the child is doing is important to him. It's what he cares about. And chances are, he'll want to talk about it.

Scene with Teacher Jennifer and boy hammering

TEACHER JENNIFER: Are you going to hammer them in?

BOY: So, I'm going to hammer them in and that's how old I am.



NARRATOR: While a few children will happily talk about what was interesting yesterday, many preschoolers will only talk about what interests them right now. So look around. See what they are manipulating, discovering, creating, playing!

Interview with Teacher Sherrie

When kids are interested in what they're doing, then that sparks their imagination and gets them talking. And if they're excited about it, and you're excited about it, then you can both talk.

Invite a Response

NARRATOR: We've found the conversation topic most likely to succeed. Now we want to invite the child to respond. But what can we say?

Scene of Teacher Robin with a boy who is playing with glue

TEACHER ROBIN: What would you make a web with?

BOY GLUEING: With glue.

TEACHER ROBIN: With glue? And what else?

NARRATOR: Good questions can get some children talking. But starting this way can make many preschoolers feel pressured and uncomfortable.

Teacher Cassie asks Nicholas a question. He turns and walks away.

TEACHER CASSIE: I tend to be more comfortable asking questions.

But we have to kind of remind ourselves that if children do have some struggles with expressive language, they're always going to shut down when you ask for a response.

NARRATOR: If a child leaves the conversation, we've lost the opportunity to work on expressive language. So how do we keep the child with us and get him talking, without pressuring him to do either?

TEACHER CASSIE: I've seen lots of kids much more likely to engage in conversation if you just make a comment - following their interests and their leads.

NARRATOR: Cassie's comments take the pressure off. Nicholas can listen and participate in the play, but he doesn't have to respond. And the interaction can still continue.

Scene of Teacher Cassie and Nicholas playing with a toy

TEACHER CASSIE: And it goes in. All the way in. And it comes out. All the way out. It is very long.

NARRATOR: Each comment Cassie makes gently invites Nicholas to respond - by offering language information, ideas for conversation. And when he's ready, he joins in.

NICHOLAS: With the round thing.

TEACHER CASSIE: With the round thing. And you have to wind it and wind it. And then.

NICHOLAS: Oops!

TEACHER CASSIE: Uh oh.

NARRATOR: Making comments as children play is a very effective way to encourage children to respond. But it's not how we typically talk. How do we make comments? And what should they be about?

Interview with Teacher Karissa

TEACHER KARISSA: Talk about an activity that they're doing, um, how they're playing with a certain toy. That, almost all the time, gets the child in to the conversation.

NARRATOR: Our comments are simply a description of what we see happening, following the child's topic of interest. Here, Kirsti watches what Sumaya is doing and comments on the action she sees.

Scene of Kirsti and Sumaya, a Somali girl, at the tactile table

TEACHER KIRSTI: You're filling it with rice. It's all full with rice and lids. Oh, pouring it out.

NARRATOR: Like a broadcast announcer, Kirsti describes exactly what Sumaya is doing and experiencing. Her comments help put language to what's on Sumaya's mind.

TEACHER KIRSTI: Oh, pouring it out. All out. You're pouring it out. You poured it out again. All out.

NARRATOR: When we make a comment, we're not just chattering, filling the empty space. We're starting a conversation. So we need to wait, and allow time for the child to respond.

TEACHER SHERRIE: Some kids have a longer, you know, processing time, so I've learned to sort of wait a little bit after making a comment, and just seeing what they'll say about it.

Scene of Teacher Sherrie and Jacob

TEACHER SHERRIE: Look what you have.

JACOB: What's that?

TEACHER SHERRIE: That looks like a mountain sheep. Look at the horns curl around.

JACOB: Curl around.

NARRATOR: More often than not, if we wait after making a comment, children will respond. But it may not be with words. Children who are shy or learning a second language may respond with a smile, eye contact, or a sound.

Scene of Teacher Kirsti and Sumaya drawing

TEACHER KIRSTI: You made a circle. I see that.

SUMAYA: Wee wee wee wee.

NARRATOR: Whatever form the response takes, the child is taking her conversational turn. And this is an important step.

Interview with Teacher Karissa

NARRATOR: Once children begin to respond verbally, what can we say that will keep the conversation going?



TEACHER KARISSA: One of the things that I do is repeat what they have just said. That way it opens up the opportunity for the child to explain a little bit of what he's doing.

Scene of Teacher Karissa and Nation

NATION: It's somebody's house.

TEACHER KARISSA: It's somebody's house.

NATION: It's Grandma's house.

NARRATOR: By repeating what children say, we let them know that we hear them, that we're interested. And it invites them to say more.

Scene of Teacher Jennifer with children at the flour table

HISPANIC BOY: I have a spoon.

TEACHER JENNIFER: You have a spoon.

HISPANIC GIRL: This is a big spoon

TEACHER JENNIFER: That is a big spoon.

NARRATOR: When the children hear their words repeated back to them, it helps them think about what they've said and encourages them to elaborate on their thoughts.

Scene with Teacher Leslie and children playing with a hermit crab

BOY: I think this guy needs some water.

TEACHER LESLIE: You think he needs a little more water?

BOY: This guy is beautiful.

TEACHER LESLIE: He is very beautiful

BOY: He has a red color.

TEACHER LESLIE: He does have a red color

BOY: I like this guy. Hey look! (Crab moves across the floor.)

TEACHER LESLIE: Look at it!

BOY: Oh look!

NARRATOR: It's so important that we find ways to talk with children that don't put pressure on them. Instead we want to invite a response by making comments, waiting, and repeating what they say. These simple tools help us get conversations going.

Conclusion

We've seen that children learn to communicate, the same way they learn other skills—through practice and experience. It all adds up.

Interview with Dia Norris

DIA NORRIS: Children with rich experiences have much greater use of language. They're able to use it in many more contexts, and they're able to understand language at a much higher level than children without experience.

NARRATOR: Experience with language is critical to children's long-term success. And we can help children gain this experience by engaging them in conversations.



In this program, we've learned that making a connection is the first step. We want to help children feel comfortable with us, so that they'll want to interact.

We've learned that children are most likely to talk with us if we find their topic, focusing our interaction around the activities that have captured their attention and interest. Finally, we've learned how to invite children to respond in ways that encourage them to talk.

Children don't become successful communicators all at once. It takes time. But if we keep providing safe opportunities for them to try, eventually our efforts will pay off.

DIA NORRIS: It's kind of like a big bowl, that you just keep filling it and filling it and filling it, and pretty soon it spills over. And sometimes it spills over in full sentences. And other times it's just that first word. But either way, language starts to flow.