

Practitioners and children talking and thinking together

Theme: *Exploring and Thinking, Aim 2 and Learning goal 3*
Age group: *Toddlers and young children*
Setting: *Sessional service (pre-school)*

'See it got stuck,' complains Claire (aged 3 years) as she sits on the tractor. 'My goodness, I wonder why those wheels aren't turning,' Rosaleen the practitioner says. Jamie (aged 4 years) who was watching the wheels spinning in the mud joins the pair. Over the next few minutes they discuss why the wheels are sticking and how to solve this problem. Claire declines Rosaleen's suggestion to get off the tractor and pull it out of the mud. Claire wants to drive out! Eventually Jamie offers an acceptable solution: 'My Granda uses long things of wood when his tractor is stuck in muck. Can we do that too?' 'What do you think Claire, will we give it a try?' Rosaleen asks. 'Ya, let's,' says Claire as she and Jamie head off to find some pieces of timber to place under the wheel. There was a problem to solve: the tractor just had to be moved. So the children together with their practitioner put on their 'thinking caps' and solved the problem.

Being able to think like this is an important skill for children to develop. In *Aistear* this type of interaction between children and practitioners, or between children and children, is called 'thinking together to build meaning and understanding'. Often you will hear it referred to as 'sustained shared thinking' (Siraj-Blatchford, Sylva, Taggart, Melhuish and Sammons, 2008). While these descriptions might sound complex, there are lots of practical things you can do as a practitioner to help children develop their thinking, including, 'tuning in' to what children

are doing and to their play and conversations, and spotting opportunities for thinking and talking together.

Do you need to plan particular learning experiences to support children's thinking and talking?

Opportunities to develop children's thinking and talking can occur at any time of the day both through planned learning experiences and through spontaneous discussions, for example when children see a spider in the corner or when the block tower keeps falling down. How you respond to these moments is crucial: the kind of comments you make, the questions you ask, and the efforts you make to encourage and support children to share their ideas with you. Both you *and* the children need to want to find out more!

Planning specific learning experiences to help children develop thinking and talking skills can also be a good way to get started. As time goes on, and you become more practised, you will see daily opportunities to think and talk together: during and after child-initiated play, in conversations at break times, when reading stories, after watching a DVD, on returning from a trip, and in small group learning experiences. You can encourage children to reflect on what they did, saw or heard: *How did you make windows and doors in the Lego house? I wonder why my keys sink and the ball floats. What do you think would happen if we left the cardboard castle out in the rain?*

These types of conversations help adults to find out how children think about things. For now, let's look at the steps involved in using **small group learning experiences** planned by you the practitioner as a way of encouraging children to talk and to develop their thinking skills. We can think about these experiences as involving 5 Ps.

Purpose: Consider *Aistear's* themes, aims and learning goals or content objectives from the Primary School Curriculum.

Planning: Choose a learning experience, decide on the location (indoors or outdoors), and think about how to group the children (5 or less).

Preparation: Gather materials. Provide resources that are open-ended. (See *Appendix 1 Resources for play*, pages 103 to 106 of *Aistear's Guidelines for Good Practice* for ideas).

Process: Introduce the learning experience and encourage the children to think and talk about what they are doing. Use open-ended comments and questions, pause and give children the time to answer and to engage with the materials, and then draw the experience to a close.

Practitioner reflection: Think about the learning experience and how you could extend further the children's thinking and talking. (The questions on *Thinking about your practice* on page four might help with this.)

What interaction strategies can you use to support children's thinking and talking?

- Use **open-ended comments**, for example:
 - *I wonder how the ice melted, I noticed sea shells just like that when I was at the beach last week.*
 - *Hmmm, that is interesting how you mixed the colours together, I love the way the sun is making a rainbow on the frosted spider's web.*
- Use **open-ended questions** to encourage children's explanations and predictions, for example:
 - *How did you manage to make a hill for the cars to roll down? What kind of clothes do we need to put on the teddies before we take them outside for a walk? Remember when we went on the trip to the farm, what did you like best?*
- Other things to try include:
 - **Modelling thinking** – *I think we might need to plan how to make that magic potion. We might need to think about how we'll fix the problem of the fallen roof.*
 - **Recapping** – *So you mixed the red and yellow paints to make orange. You made a ramp using the long piece of wood.*
 - **Drawing on children's own stories, interests and home lives** – *Can you tell me about your dog Rusty? I know very little about dinosaurs, can you tell me about them?*
 - **Offering your own experiences** – *Porridge is my favourite breakfast. I went to Italy for my holidays. I'm a bit scared of hospitals too.*
 - **Using specific feedback to encourage further thinking** – *You've worked hard to build the bridge. What can we do to make sure that lorry is going to fit under it?*

As well as using open-ended comments and questions you need to be a **good listener** in order to encourage children to talk and think. Here are some tips that might help you with this:

- Keep the groups small (5 children or less).
- Stay with the group and affirm children's contributions non-verbally, for example by *holding eye contact, smiling, nodding*.
- Adopt the 'five second rule', whereby you wait five seconds for children to respond to comments, queries, and contributions. Resist the temptation to jump in if there is silence, but if you feel the child is struggling do give a prompt or open-ended comment.

Aistear's Guidelines for Good Practice provide lots of examples of extended thinking and talking in action. Check out Learning Experiences 15, 16, 30, 31, 62, 64, 65.

Thinking about the children's progress

It is important to find out if, and to what extent, children's thinking and talking skills are improving over time. The following can provide a lot of useful information:

- **Video/audio** record (with permission) children during different learning experiences and reflect on their responses to questions and their contributions to discussions, including the kinds of questions they ask.
- **Make a note** of the connections children make in relation to previous, present or future experiences, for example, *We are going to the zoo next week*. Or, as we saw at the beginning of this tip sheet, Jamie was able to draw on his experience with his Grandad to help solve Claire's problem.

- **Record on post-its** children's use of new vocabulary, for example using a word you introduced.
- **Take note** of children's greater confidence in speaking in a group.
- **Notice** enhanced listening skills. This can be seen very clearly, for example, at story or circle time.

Thinking about your practice

A key question for you the practitioner is how you might further improve your practice in this area.

- Did you really listen to the children? (Digitally recording your interactions with the children will help you see exactly who is doing the talking and who is doing the listening.)
- What kinds of inputs did you make? Did you, for example
 - use open-ended comments and questions?
 - give children sufficient time to put their answers together?
- Did all the children in the group have the opportunity to contribute?
- What information, if any, did you gather about the children's talking and/or thinking skills? For example, what words did they use? How did they share their ideas with each other and with you?
- How could you extend the children's talking and thinking more?

Early childhood practitioners have a unique opportunity to enhance children's thinking and talking. Why not try out some of the ideas in this tip sheet? You will be pleasantly surprised by the high level of thinking that is going on in those little heads!

Find out more

If you'd like to find out more about helping children to develop their thinking skills, you might be interested in the following:

Clark, J. (2007) *Sustained shared thinking ideas and activities to unlock current topics*. Leicestershire: Featherstone Education Ltd.

French, G. (2008) *Supporting quality Guidelines for professional practice in early childhood services, Book 2 Enhancing children's early learning* (3rd ed.). Dublin: Barnardos.

French, G. (2011) *Towards extended purposive conversations An exploration of interactions between three practitioners and young children in early education and care settings in urban areas designated as disadvantaged*. Unpublished doctoral thesis, St. Patrick's College, Drumcondra, Dublin.

MacNaughton, G. and Williams, G. (2008) *Teaching young children Choices in theory and practice* (2nd ed.). Berkshire: Open University Press.

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) (2009) *Aistear the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework*. Dublin: NCCA, www.ncca.ie/earlylearning.

Siraj-Blatchford, I., Sylva, K., Taggart, B., Melhuish, E. and Sammons, P. (2008) The effective provision of pre-school education (EPPE) project: Intensive case studies of practice across the English Foundation Stage, in S. O'Brien, P. Cassidy and H. Schonfeld (Eds.), *Vision into Practice, Conference proceedings* (pp. 36-45). Dublin: Centre for Early Childhood Development and Education.