

Enhancing Language

Connections to *Aistear* and *Síolta*

Aistear

Themes: *Well-being, Identity and Belonging, Communicating, Exploring and Thinking*

Guidelines for good practice: *Learning and developing through interactions* (pp.27-51)

Síolta Standards

1: *Rights of the Child*, C1.1, 1.2, 1.3

5: *Interactions*, C5.1, 5.2, 5.3, 5.4, 5.5

Research Digests linked to the above *Standards*

From three to six years, children rapidly increase the number of words they use and change how they use language to communicate and to learn. A child turning **three years** may have **a few hundred words** and by the time he/she is **six years**, may have **many thousand words**. At that stage, children use complex language to interact, tell stories and describe past events, problem-solve, negotiate, imagine, co-operate and develop relationships. Here are some ideas to enhance language development.

- **Follow children's lead:** Wait for children to initiate an interaction or watch closely to see what they are interested in before speaking.
- **Be face-to-face:** Be at a level where you can look at children's faces and they can look at you. Bend down to their level when talking. Show active listening skills by leaning forward and waiting expectantly. This shows them you are ready to listen and encourages them to talk.

- **Respond:** Respond with interest to what a child says or does.
- **Repeat:** If a child's speech is unclear, repeat back what the child said or fix-up grammar mistakes. For example, when a child says, *Him has a tar*, you might say, *Yes, he has a car*.
- **Make comments:** Comment on what a child says or on what he/she is doing. Then wait for a response.

Most importantly at this stage, **expand on what children say**. Make their sentences longer by adding words or adding another idea. For example, a three-year-old shows a practitioner his knee and comments, *I have a sore knee*. A practitioner might respond with, *Oh, you have a sore knee because you fell*.

Using questions to enhance language

Open-ended questions stimulate thinking and conversation, as they require more thought and more than a simple one-word answer. Closed questions can stop a conversation and should be used less frequently. Examples of closed questions include questions that test children, for example, *What colour is that?* or questions that only have a yes/no answer, for example, *Do you have a dog?*

By using open-ended questions like *I wonder...* or *what would happen if...* at the start of a sentence, you are sharing the thinking with the child and placing less pressure on him/her. Use open-ended questions that match a child's level of language development. For more examples of open-ended questions, see *Practitioners and children thinking and talking together*.

Use more comments than questions and remember to wait for children to respond.

Longer conversations which stimulate children to extend their thinking, are great for their language development.

Vocabulary development

You can help children develop language skills by following their lead and using **language which relates to what they are doing or are interested in**.

- Follow **children's interests** to introduce new language, for example, if children are interested in dinosaurs find out the names of dinosaurs, their characteristics and what they ate. Don't be afraid to model difficult words for children such as triassic, cretaceous or palaeontologist. These new words will fascinate and delight them.
- Use a **variety of words**. Use naming words (table, dog), action words (running, cycling), describing words (blue, slowly) location words (such as under/on), comparisons (biggest/widest), and abstract concepts (first/last, before/after). For example, say *put the milk jug on the table* rather than saying *put that on the table*.
- Use different words that have the same meaning**. As well as saying *happy*, talk about being *delighted, excited, ecstatic* and so on. Instead of saying *done, say finished or completed*.

- Model words**. When playing doctors and nurses, use words like, *thermometer, x-ray, stethoscope, medicine* and so on. The more times children hear these words during play, the more confident they will be in using them.
- Use language **related to the senses**, for example, feeling words such as *rough, smooth, sticky, flexible*, or words relating to taste, for example, *sweet, sour, juicy, salty*. Use them in a tasting activity and then at snack or lunch-time to reinforce them.
- Use words that **categorise**, for example, sorting clothes, fruit, vegetables, furniture. For example, *We've lots of different types of fruit for snack today - pineapple, kiwi, melon and banana*. When children learn words by categories, they relate them to each other, and store and recall them more easily.
- Use words that describe **parts of objects**, for example, instead of just saying car, talk about parts of the car such as *engine, headlights, indicators, bonnet, axle, wheels, tyres, battery, fuel-tank* and so on. Talk about what the car is made of such as *metal, rubber, wheels* and the type of car.
- Repeat and relate**. Repeat new words often and relate them to different contexts, for example, *Remember the book where the children went through the woods, well, we are threading the lace through the bead*.

Reading books

Expose children to new vocabulary not often used in everyday language. Explain new words and give examples of how to use them. For example, *The author or person who wrote this book, is Katie Kavanagh, and the illustrator, that means the person who drew the pictures, is called Tom O'Toole*. Make book-reading a conversation time. You can do this by allowing children to take the lead and see what they are interested in. Remember to wait, get their opinions, problem-solve, imagine and relate it to their own lives using open-ended questions and comments. For more ideas on book reading and a list of selected books for children from 2^{1/2}-6 years see our tip sheet *Suggested picturebook list*.

Pretend play

As children develop, they spend more time interacting with peers. You can help them develop language through play by joining the play 'in role'. This might involve you:

- Modelling particular behaviour that extends the ideas and the language such as pretending you are a mechanic and fixing a car.
- Encouraging more conversation by referring children to each other rather than answering yourself, for example, *There is a customer here who wants something*.
- Adding ideas that will stimulate problem-solving or debate such as, *Oh no, the bus has broken down, what shall we do?*

Reflect on your skills and personal style of interaction and be aware of the language level of the children. In this way, you can make sure you are adapting your interaction to their level and supporting them to develop their language skills further. You might also like to look at the *Self-evaluation Tools, Nurturing and Extending Interactions – Young Children (3-6 years)*.