



THE POWER OF "RICH TALK":

CONVERSATIONAL STRATEGIES TO BOND WITH AND BUILD YOUNG CHILDREN'S SKILLS

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WELCOME!

I hope this talk enhances your conversations with the children in your lives....

Building skills *while* nurturing relationships

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SAY YOU WALK INTO A CLASSROOM:

"What's this?" the teacher, "Barbara," asks, showing a picture of a reindeer from a picture book, surrounded by pine trees.

"A hippo!" one girl calls out.

How does the teacher respond?

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SCENARIO A:

- "Nope, not a hippo," the teacher says. "Anyone else?"
- "A llama?" a second child asks.
- "No," the teacher says.
- "A reindeer!" another child calls out.
- "That's right." The teacher smiles and flips the page, showing a grizzly bear. "And what's this?"
- "A bear?" a child asks.
- "Yes," the teacher says, and turns the page again. "Good job."

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SCENARIO B:

- "It's not exactly a hippo," the teacher says. "But it has four legs like a hippo. Does anyone else have an idea?"
- "A llama?" a second child asks.
- "It's not a llama either, but it is fuzzy like a llama."
- "A reindeer!" a third child calls out.
- "That's right, it is a reindeer." The teacher stays on that page. "How did you know?"
- "It was the antlers," the child says.
- "Exactly. Male reindeer have antlers. Before we move on," the teacher says, "let's talk about what reindeer and llamas and hippos have in common."
- "They're animals!" a child calls out.
- "That's right." The teacher smiles. "And they're a certain kind of animal. They're mammals."

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IN BOTH THESE SCENARIOS:

The teacher asked the children questions

The children answered and received information

On the surface, they look similar....

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BUT THERE ARE KEY DIFFERENCES

• In Scenario B:

- The children have the chance to *think aloud* about their ideas
- They hear more thinking from the teacher and other children
- They learn more about each aspect they bring up

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AN OPTIMISTIC PERSPECTIVE:

We can enhance our conversations with the young children in our lives

Enhancing conversations enhances relationships

... Enhancing relationships means helping children thrive

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UPENDING MISCONCEPTIONS LIKE THESE:

"Great" talk with kids requires advanced degrees

It's better to have fancy materials and an "important topic" to discuss

You need at least a thirty- or forty-minute block of time for great conversations

It's impossible to have "great" conversations with a lot of children...or with children of different ages

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IN FACT:

Great conversations can happen in "extra" time

They can start with ants, rocks, plastic balls—whatever the children notice

They can evolve and expand based on children's interests—and conflicts

They don't require any "specialized" knowledge

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WHY FOCUS ON GREAT CONVERSATIONS NOW?

Dramatic increases in anxiety, stress, and fear among children during and after the pandemic

48 percent of children in one study showed symptoms of post-traumatic stress

Children and adults report using more coping skills (meditation, self-talk) to manage stress

→ We can "train" ourselves and the kids we work with to better manage stress and improve resilience

Ma et al., 2021; Samji et al., 2022

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BUT ONLY IF...

We start with what children are authentically interested in/worried about/concerned with

We emphasize conversation to *welcome*, not *push away*, differences

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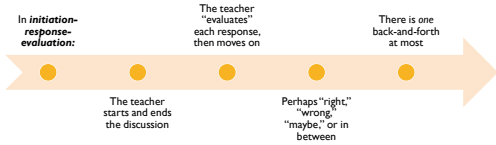
HOW MUCH DO WE LET CHILDREN TALK?

- In most EC classrooms, talk is rarely initiated by students
- Children rarely comment on each other's dialogues
- Most conversations are Initiation-Response-Evaluation

Muhonen et al.'s study (2020)

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THE COMMON PATTERN



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THIS PATTERN TEACHES, BUT MISSES OUT ON:



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WHY CARE ABOUT CHILD-DRIVEN CONVERSATION?

- Starting with children's ideas:
 - Lets them know we care about them as people
 - Lets us target their language and thinking needs
 - Builds their empathy, creativity, and confidence
 - Gives them a feeling of belonging
 - Can prevent behavior problems based on feeling "unheard"

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TALKING "WITH" KIDS, NOT "AT" THEM

- The power of conversational turns
- Building children's "language" and "social" brains
- Stretching children's ideas—the "Zone of Proximal Development"—and helping *them* stretch each other

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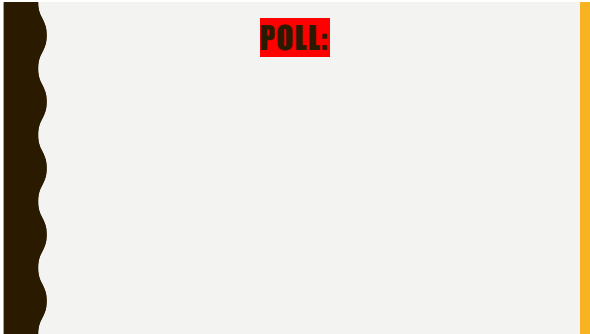
NEW RESEARCH: IT'S ALL ABOUT THE CONVERSATIONAL TURNS

- These turns link to:
 - Changes in language skills
 - Brain changes in language and social areas
- Enhancing these turns enhances children's skills
- Talk is both a language activity and a social activity

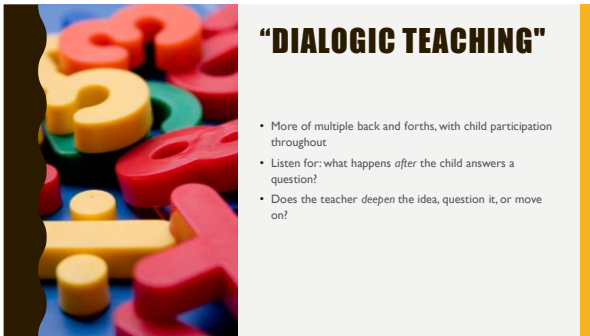


Romeo et al., 2018, 2021

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A slide with a white background, a dark brown wavy border on the left, and a yellow vertical bar on the right. The word "POLL:" is written in white on a red rectangular background in the upper left.

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A slide with a white background, a dark brown wavy border on the left, and a yellow vertical bar on the right. On the left is an image of colorful wooden letters. The title "DIALOGIC TEACHING" is in bold black text. Below it is a bulleted list of three points.

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"DIALOGIC TEACHING"

- More of multiple back and forths, with child participation throughout
- Listen for: what happens *after* the child answers a question?
- Does the teacher *deepen* the idea, question it, or move on?

A slide with a white background, a dark brown wavy border on the left, and a yellow vertical bar on the right. The left side features a dark brown background with white question marks. The text "QUESTIONS CREATE OPPORTUNITIES" is in bold black text inside a white scalloped-edged circle.

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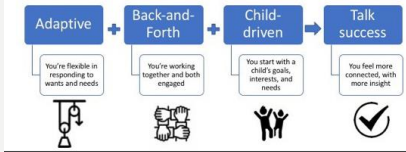
LET'S TAKE A CONCRETE EXAMPLE

What is the difference between these two examples?

- #1. **Child:** "It looks like it's about to rain."
Adult: "Oh, yes. Should we get your shoes?"
- #2. **Child:** "It looks like it's about to rain."
Adult: "What makes you think that?"
Child: "There are lots of clouds, and the wind is blowing the trees."
Adult: "Oh, I see that. I also see that someone has covered up the plants in the garden. How much rain do you think there will be?"

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The ABCs of Rich Talk



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THE POWER OF RICH TALK:



- Lets children be "seen" and "heard" for their full, authentic selves
- Lets us be our authentic selves with them
- Creates strong, nurturing relationships from the ground up
- Shores up connections within families
- Provides a solid foundation for children's later lives

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REFLECTIVE LISTENING: A KEY FOUNDATION

- **Teacher check-in: How much do you:**
- Allow for complete responses without interrupting?
- Give extra pauses or wait time?
- Invite students to write notes or draw?
- Notice if you are feeling hostile toward another point of view?
- Ask questions to better understand experiences?
- Comment in ways that validate emotions?



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“REPAIR” CONVERSATIONS ARE KEY

- “We learn from people who think and act differently”
- “When we explore our disagreements, we learn more and develop empathy”
- “A community is made up of people with different perspectives”



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“RICH TALK” TEACHES CHILDREN TO DISAGREE WELL

- “I understand that part of your idea, but not that part. Can you explain?”
- “I agree with most of what you are saying, but that part upsets me.”
- “I like how that sounds in the short term, but I don’t know how it would work over time.”



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“ADAPTIVE CHECK”: MEETING A CHILD WHERE THEY ARE

	Think:
	1) Situation
	2) Setting
	3) Stage and age

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TO START: TRY “CURIOUS WAITING”

- Spend a few minutes sitting quietly with a child.
- Watch as they draw, play, or work on a project.
- Ask yourself: What are they showing me they are interested in?
- Allow the answer to guide your comments.

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"That bridge looks like it was tough to build."

"What are you thinking of trying after that?"

"Can you tell me more about that part on the front?"

"Which part is finished, and which are you still working on?"

LET YOUR COMMENTS BE AN INVITATION

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THE ROADMAP FOR RICH TALK




The Three Es for Rich Talk:

- Expand** on a child's thinking
- Explore** aspects beyond the here and now
- Evaluate** the process and product of thinking with a reflective, compassionate eye

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EXAMPLES: EXPANDING

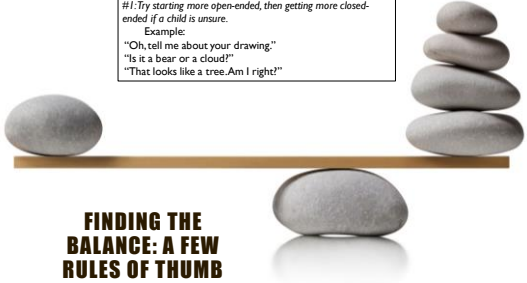


- *Child #1:* "I like that blue truck."
- *Adult:* "Oh yes, that blue truck with wheels. That's a monster truck."
- *Child #2:* "I feel sad about leaving."
- *Adult:* "I know what you mean. I feel sad to leave friends here, but also a little worried about what the new place will be like."

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#1: Try starting more open-ended, then getting more closed-ended if a child is unsure.

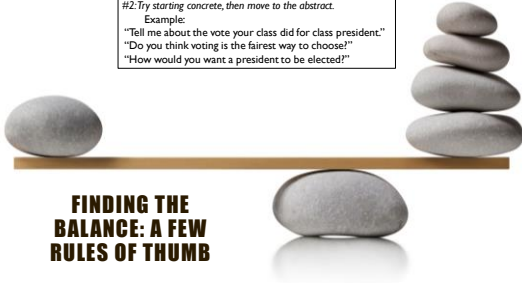
Example:
 "Oh, tell me about your drawing."
 "Is it a bear or a cloud?"
 "That looks like a tree. Am I right?"



FINDING THE BALANCE: A FEW RULES OF THUMB

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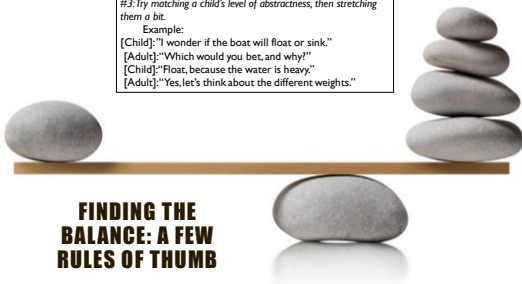
#2: Try starting concrete, then move to the abstract.
 Example:
 "Tell me about the vote your class did for class president."
 "Do you think voting is the fairest way to choose?"
 "How would you want a president to be elected?"



**FINDING THE
 BALANCE: A FEW
 RULES OF THUMB**

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#3: Try matching a child's level of abstractness, then stretching them a bit.
 Example:
 [Child]: "I wonder if the boat will float or sink."
 [Adult]: "Which would you bet, and why?"
 [Child]: "Float, because the water is heavy."
 [Adult]: "Yes, let's think about the different weights."



**FINDING THE
 BALANCE: A FEW
 RULES OF THUMB**

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ALSO CONSIDER:



Level of vocabulary
 (common vs.
 uncommon, "hard" vs.
 "easy")



Length of your
 sentences



Number of
 questions/comments per
 turn



Child's experience and
 background knowledge

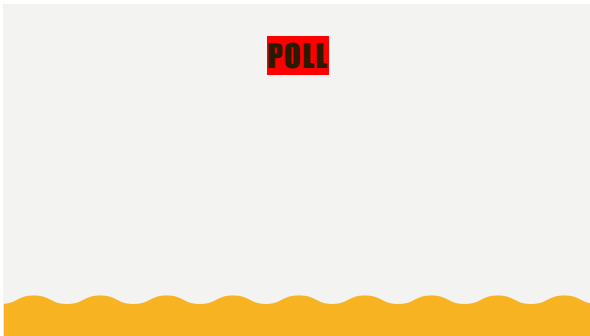
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USING BOOKS AND SCREENS AS JUMPSTARTS

- Builds empathy: "Why do you think the character acted that way?"
- Nurtures creative thinking: "How would you have ended the story?"
- Expands vocabulary: "What makes that engine work?"

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WHY?

- It's likely all about the *conversations* that take place
- Both *during* and *after* the fact

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CREATING A "RICH TALK" ENVIRONMENT

- Conversational prompts and questions in play areas
- Sentence and question stems
- Comments to inspire and encourage creative play and collaboration
- Picture prompts and cues to support early readers



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FOR EXAMPLE:

- Invent a story with these stuffed bears.
 - "Are they mother bears? Or bear children? Or police officers? Maybe they aren't bears at all!"
 - "What problem are the bears having? How will they solve it?"
- How many ways can you use this fire hose?
- Can you make a city out of these blocks?
 - "What buildings will you need to make a city?"
 - "Who is going to live in your city?"



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POLL

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RICH TALK SCHOOLS: THE WAY FORWARD

- 1** Encourage "rich talk" every day, in small moments
- 2** Document how these small moments build and accumulate
- 3** See children's skills and confidence growing, and share with parents
- 4** Enhance relationships between children, teachers, parents, and staff

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CREATE A "RICH TALK" SCHOOL

Step 1: Get everyone on the same page

What is Rich Talk? Why is it important?


Focus on role-plays and discussions with all teachers and staff

Parent outreach as critical—text, apps

Emphasize the chance for profound enhancements in teaching, learning, and parent engagement

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FOLLOWING UP: RICH TALK OVER TIME

-  **Step 2:** Offer coaching, support, and ongoing feedback for teachers and staff
-  Ideally, weekly or bi-weekly meetings to discuss, deepen practice, problem-solve
-  Include all staff and professionals: bus drivers, lunch staff, afterschool teachers
-  Invite parents to learn more through workshops, handouts, text/app invitations and reminders, check-ins

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REMEMBER: THERE'S NO "RIGHT WAY" TO TALK

Emphasize diversity and celebration of many different speaking styles

Research shows kids benefit from many *diverse* languages, dialects, and ways of engagement

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CELEBRATE SUCCESS

- Step 3: Offer ongoing opportunities to document and celebrate "rich talk" moments
- Consider parent and caregiver groups, online and in person
- Have a "rich talk" wall in school
- Document great conversations or comments with videos, photos, or in written form
- Remember: "repair" conversations are the key to rich talk

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THANK YOU, AND PLEASE KEEP IN TOUCH!

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