

# Supporting Oral Language and Vocabulary Development



Parents, family members, caregivers, and teachers can support the oral language and vocabulary development of young children throughout the day during regular activities. The following examples show how natural an effort supporting this development can be!

*Ten-month-old Juanita tries to get her father's attention as her father makes himself a snack. Juanita's father engages her in conversation and builds on what Juanita says.*

**Juanita:** Da Da!

**Juanita's father:** Hi, Juanita! Dada is making a snack. Do you want a bottle?

**Juanita:** Ba! [Juanita puts her hand up to get a bottle.]

**Juanita's father:** A bottle? Sure, Juanita!

**Juanita:** [Laughs and reaches for the bottle.]



Juanita is learning how she can use sounds to interact with her father and how to take turns during a conversation. She is also learning new vocabulary. Juanita's father supports her oral language and vocabulary development when he includes her in ordinary conversation. When she goes to Early Head Start, Juanita will make sounds to express herself and will expect her caregivers to engage in conversations with her, just as her father does.

*Min, who is 2 years and 10 months old, expresses his wants and uses his speech to engage his mother in a conversation with new and interesting words.*

**Min:** I want my bike!

**Min's mother:** Oh, you want your bike. Where do you want to ride?

**Min:** Miguel's.

**Min's mother:** You want to ride to Miguel's? That is a long ride. He lives far away across town. What if you ride to the park instead?

**Min:** I ride to the park.

**Min's mother:** Yes, you can! You can ride and I will walk. What do you want to do at the park?

**Min:** I want to ride and swing.

**Min's mother:** You love to swing, Min. You like to swing high up! You soar!

**Min:** I like to swing high up! I like to swing to the sky! I soar! Whee! Whee!

Min's mother extends his conversation by adding additional words and thoughts. Min is learning these new words all the time as he hears them and practices using them himself.

Min is also learning how to have a conversation. He and his mother are taking turns talking—Min had five turns during this conversation. His mother knows that the longer the exchange between them goes on the more Min will learn. So she extends his speech by:

- ▶ **Asking** him questions—"What do you want to do at the park?"
- ▶ **Extending** her speech—"You like to swing up high!"
- ▶ **Adding** new and interesting words to what she says—"You soar!"

Min's mother is helping him learn how to use the words he knows and to use many words when talking.

*Four-year-olds Ari and Jean are at the science center looking at some sprouts that they have planted. Their teacher Kate listens and then supports their oral language and vocabulary by extending their language and their thinking.*

**Ari:** I see a new sprout!

**Jean:** Yes, right there!

**Teacher Kate:** Wow. What does it look like?

**Jean:** It is little. It is green.

**Ari:** No, it is yellow. It is like a dot.

**Teacher Kate:** So you have a little yellowish-green sprout?

**Ari:** Yes, it is yellowish green! Yellow and green.

**Teacher Kate:** How does it compare to the older sprouts?

**Jean:** It is smaller and newer.

**Ari:** The other ones are bigger and greener.

**Teacher Kate:** That's a good observation. So what do you think will happen to this sprout as it grows?



**Ari:** Hmm. Will it get bigger and greener, too?

**Jean:** I think it will look like that one [points to a bigger sprout].

**Teacher Kate:** Let's see. We'll write in our journal that we predict that the sprout will get bigger and greener as it grows.

**Ari:** Yes, we predict it will be big. And green.

**Jean:** Now it is so little. It is just a baby sprout.

Ari and Jean are learning how to make observations by using oral language. Their teacher Kate is asking open-ended questions with more than one possible answer, such as, "What do you think will happen?" She extends their talk by keeping the conversation going and adding some vocabulary ("compare," "observe," and "predict") to help develop their oral language skills.

*Five-year-old Patrick is telling a small group of children about his trip to the natural history museum. He is holding the map of the museum in his hands as well as a picture he drew of a dinosaur skeleton.*

**Patrick:** I went to the natural history museum with my mom and dad. We saw lots of dinosaurs! My favorite one was the Tyrannosaurus Rex. We saw the whole skeleton of bones. The skeleton was taller than my dad! He couldn't even reach the top! My mom said it wasn't a real skeleton, but a pretend one. But it looks just like a real one.

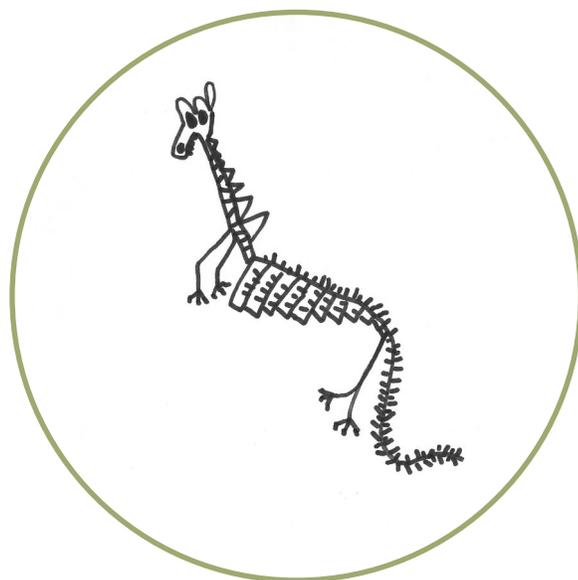
They let you hold some of the bones, too. I held a bone but it wasn't heavy. My dad said we could go back there again. I want to go tomorrow and see if the skeleton looks like the one in my book, but my mom said we have to go to the grocery store.

**Liam:** Did you touch the skeleton? Did it fall down?

**Patrick:** I couldn't touch the big skeleton, but I could touch some bones. The bones were hard.

**Korin:** I have a skeleton too. My grandpa showed me a picture in a book when I broke my arm. I have bones in my arm just like the skeleton does!

**Patrick:** That's what my mom said! She said I have bones in my body, too. I don't see them though.



As Patrick shares his personal narrative about an activity he participated in, he shows he is a

- ▶ Communicate his thoughts about an event in his own words
- ▶ Use new vocabulary words, such as “skeleton”
- ▶ Enjoy talking about himself
- ▶ Learn how to use words to express himself

So that the children could practice their verbal skills, Patrick’s teacher organized this sharing activity by:

- ▶ Keeping the group small
- ▶ Encouraging them to be active listeners by asking and answering questions
- ▶ Preparing children to share by asking them to make a picture of what they wanted to talk about
- ▶ Keeping the sharing time short (no more than 10–15 minutes) so no one got bored
- ▶ Preparing the children to read and write!



In addition, Patrick’s teacher provides the children in the preschool classroom with opportunities to tell stories about things that have happened to them and encourages the children to talk for as long as they can. This practice of telling stories will also help them learn to read and write.

