

Especially for practitioners working with preschoolers! 

Listen To Me

Talking and Listening

“Private speech” is the kind of talking aloud children (and adults) do when they talk to themselves. An adult using private speech might ask himself or herself aloud, “Where did I leave my keys?” Private speech is an important part of language and learning development for preschoolers. It helps them practice unfamiliar kinds of language and reinforces ideas that they are trying to remember.

What is the practice?

You can encourage the preschoolers in your classroom to use private speech by expressing interest (“It sounds like the toys are having a really exciting conversation! Can you tell me what they’re talking about?”) and by suggesting its uses (“Sometimes when I’m really mad I count to ten out loud until I’m calmer. Let’s try that now.”).



What does the practice look like?

Just like adults, preschoolers can use private speech to calm down when they are upset or to remember the steps of a task that is still unfamiliar. You may hear a preschool child talking to himself while playing alone in a classroom center, making up a story or dialogue for a stuffed animal or other toys. If he is eager to have you or another child in the class join his play, you can ask him to share what the toys are talking about. You may hear a preschooler in your class muttering angrily to himself when he is frustrated, or reciting the “rules” of a particular task when he is trying to do something new. You can encourage this by suggesting he “use words” (“It’s okay to be mad and say you’re mad; that’s why we use our words”) and think through what he’s trying to do (“I can see you want to build that tower by yourself. Where should you put the next block?”).

How do you do the practice?

There are many everyday ways you can encourage private speech depending on the context and for what the children in your preschool class are using it. Private speech is particularly useful for many children in understanding and controlling their emotions and helping them calm down.

- Modeling private speech is one way to encourage preschool children. If you forget where you put something, for example, you might say something like, “Let’s see, we came in from the playground and then I walked over to the sink to wash my hands....” This demonstrates for the children your thought process and the way that you verbalize it to help yourself remember.
- Offer suggestions of what you might tell yourself when you are having trouble with something. For example, if a child is frustrated trying to get his coat buttoned, you can help him “talk it through”: “Sometimes when I’m trying to do something hard I start feeling mad, but then I try to slow down, take some deep breaths, and tell myself what I need to do first. What could you do to get the button in the hole more easily?”
- Praise the children when you see them using private speech: “It wasn’t easy to get all those pieces back in the box, but I heard you say ‘First the red ones, then the blue ones.’ That was a great way to help remind yourself how to do it!”
- Encourage the playful use of private speech by asking what the toys are “thinking” or “saying” when you see children in the class playing alone: “That looks like a really fun game those toys are playing. Can you tell me what this one is thinking?” This helps the preschoolers experiment with different kinds of speech, building their vocabulary and fluency.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Do the children in your preschool class use private speech while playing alone?
- Can the preschoolers use private speech to help calm themselves?
- Do the preschoolers try to remember the steps to a task by “talking it through”?

Take a look at more “private speech”

Talking Away a Worry



Preschool teacher Ms. Patricia notices 4-year-old Maya playing by herself in the classroom’s kitchen area. She has a doll and a stuffed animal and is talking with great animation. Ms. Patricia goes closer and overhears Maya talking in a “grown up” voice for the doll, saying “and I will come right back home.” Ms. Patricia remembers that Maya’s mother mentioned she is going out of town on a business trip. She approaches and picks up the stuffed animal. “I think this little bear’s worried because his mom is going away for a few days.” Maya nods and says, “But she says she’ll be back soon.” “What does the bear think about that?” Ms. Patricia asks. Maya shrugs. “Why don’t you help him talk about it with his mom?” She pretends to make the bear talk aloud to the “mom” doll, then she lets Maya take over and finish the conversation. Soon she sees Maya smiling as she joins the other kids in play.

Best Buddies

Four-year-old James is best buddies with Reggie at preschool. One day Reggie is absent and James keeps to himself during free time, seeming lost as to what to do. To encourage James to get involved in a fun activity of his choice, his teacher reminds him of fun things that he and Reggie do when they are together. “You can build a zoo for the animals,” she suggests to him. “Remember when you and Reggie did that and the animals all moved in?” The teacher gets a toy lion and makes it “talk” about needing a safe new zoo so it will not be tempted to gobble up people. James laughs, and a little while later his teacher overhears James “talking” for each animal as he uses blocks to build their new homes. When another child in the class finishes a game, she helps the child ask James if he can join in, and James tells him about all the zoo buildings he is making.



Transition Talk



Four-and-a-half-year-old Maria has difficulty transitioning from one activity to another when she’s at preschool and gets anxious and angry at these times. Her teacher has encouraged her to talk to herself out loud when it is time to switch activities, to help her remember what is coming next. They have a special day planned with a trip to the zoo, so during morning circle time, her preschool teacher asks the class: “Remember what we’re going to do today? First we’ll get on the van and then...” She calls on Maria and waits patiently for her to complete the sentence “Then we are going to drive to the zoo!” Maria says, remembering. “Then what will we do?” the teacher asks her. “Then we will get out and see the animals.” “That’s right!” the teacher tells her. “And class, if anyone feels mad or worried, what should they do?” “Count to ten,” one of the other children says. “Not hit or yell” adds Maria, “just use our words or do our counts.” “You’re right,” her teacher replies, “We’re going to have a really fun day.” The teacher knows this line of discussion helps Maria, because she hears Maria counting or talking quietly to herself when she gets frustrated, instead of hitting the way she did in the past.

Talk Is Fun

Talking and Listening

Playing verbal word games is an engaging way for young children to build early literacy skills.

What is the practice?

Word games help preschool children develop listening comprehension skills and broaden their vocabulary. They can learn to communicate more effectively by playing games that introduce new words.

What does the practice look like?



Preschool children gathered on their playground are deciding whether to play “Simon Says,” “I Spy,” or “Duck, Duck, Goose.” All of these are word games that help build listening comprehension and vocabulary. Word games can have endless variations. They can be changed depending on your location. “I Spy” in a classroom can use very different words from “I Spy” at a museum. Use your children’s interests to make the game more meaningful and fun. “Duck, Duck, Goose” can use pairs of words about dinosaurs, planets, or any other interesting topic.

How do you do the practice?

There are many opportunities during the day to play word games with preschoolers.

- “I Spy” is a great game to play on field trips or even in the classroom during circle time. It helps children build their descriptive skills and practice listening to verbal clues.
- Games such as “Mother, May I?” and “Simon Says” can be good gross motor activities for outside time. These games also develop listening comprehension and give children practice at moving their bodies in response to verbal commands. They can also give children a chance to use words they might not use in daily conversation.
- Word games can be played during shared book reading, particularly with books that are familiar to your preschool class. Challenge your students by leaving off the end of a sentence or phrase for them to fill in. With rhyming books, have them come up with other words that rhyme.
- Preschoolers are often just starting to learn about opposites, which can be the source of other fun word games. Ask one child to think of a word, then another child to find the word’s opposite. This can be a great vocabulary builder and it gives preschool children practice with the concepts of “alike” and “different.”

How do you know the practice worked?

- Do your preschool students show enthusiasm for playing word games?
- Are your preschool students using new words?
- Are your preschool students showing increased ability to follow verbal directions during games?

Take a look at more fun with talking and listening

Ins and Outs of "Simon"

The preschool children in Raiza's class are an active, lively bunch. Some of their favorite word games are played outside, amid lots of running around. Raiza has modified "Simon Says" to suit her children's needs. When they are inside they play "Inside Simon." The Inside leader uses body part names and spatial directions (e.g., "lift your arms up"). When they are on the playground, they love to play "Outside Simon." In this more active game the leader may direct the others to run in circles, hop up and down, or dance in place. Raiza finds that both games are a great way to help her children focus, listen, and burn off some energy.



"I Spy" on the Go!

Naomi takes her preschool class on weekly field trips. While riding on the bus she keeps the children occupied by playing "I Spy." They call out everything they see in a certain category—everything red, everything with two wheels, everything moving slowly, etc. They practice using new words and describing what they see around them. The game keeps everyone happy until they reach their destination. They play "I Spy" a different way in the classroom. Each child gets a turn and the others ask questions until someone guesses the right answer.

Playful Transitions

Many of the preschool children in Randi's inclusive class have trouble with transitions. She found that using word games with them makes these times easier. Randi often gets the children's attention by speaking directions softly. This lets them know that something is coming and they need to pay attention. For example, she might say, "If you can hear my voice, put your hands on your head." Other times, she will start a nursery rhyme, waiting for the children to join in with the words she leaves out. She'll say, "This old man, he played one, he played knick-knack on my..." and the children will say, "Thumb." These word games help the children with language problems become better at listening and using words. They also help all the children make an easier transition between activities.



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Talk It Up!

Talking and Listening

Preschoolers are interested and curious about the world around them. Talking with the children in your care about things that interest them and actively engaging them in conversation helps develop language and literacy skills that last a lifetime.

What is the practice?

Having conversations with your preschoolers can be entertaining, and it helps promote language development and vocabulary. Engage your preschoolers by noticing things they like and asking them questions about things they find interesting. Encourage them to share their ideas about things that they like. Talking purposefully with your preschoolers introduces them to new words and helps them develop new language skills.



What does the practice look like?

When a preschooler runs up to a teacher, excited to share a story about what happened on the playground, it is a great time for a conversation and a learning opportunity. Ask the child specific questions about what happened, who was there, what he did, and what others did. Encourage him to reflect on why he made a particular choice, and what might have happened otherwise. Show genuine interest by keeping up the conversation as long as he has something to say.

How do you do the practice?

There are many opportunities for daily conversation with preschoolers. The most important thing is to follow the child's lead and show enthusiasm.

- Encourage role-playing. During center time listen to all the pretend play taking place and encourage it by asking questions and making suggestions.
- Meal times are great times for conversation. During breakfast, lunch or snack, ask the children how they like what they are eating. Talk about whether they have eaten it before and ask them to tell you how it tastes. Help children use new words (e.g., spicy, sharp, bland, etc.) to describe what they are tasting. Listen to their thoughts.
- Story time is another great time for conversation. During daily book readings, prompt the children about the story by asking wh- questions. Let them share ideas about what they think will happen next in the story.
- During group time, ask the children to participate by talking about things that have happened when they are not at school. Encourage them to listen to one another. One way to do this is by taking turns. Give one student at a time a chance to speak, and other students the chance to ask questions.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Are your children using new words?
- Are they talking more to you and to each other?
- Are the children in your class engaging in role play?

Take a look at more terrific times to talk

A Great Beginning

Four-year-old Marisa loves coming to school. She knows that upon arrival her teacher, Heidi, will spend a few minutes listening to whatever is on her mind. "Good morning, Marisa," Heidi says. "How are you today?" While Marisa puts her backpack away, she tells Heidi about her gymnastics class from the evening before. "Did you do a somersault last night?" Heidi asks. "That must have been exciting!" Heidi always ends the morning conversation the same way. She asks Marisa what she plans to do that day and talks about the day's routine. This morning chat gives Marisa practice at using words and listening. It helps her feel that her teacher really cares about her.



My Moment in the Sun

One daily routine in Serena's preschool class allows each student to talk about something important to him or her. It can be anything about which a child wants to talk. Children talk about an upcoming birthday, a fight with a friend, a favorite toy, or anything else. At circle time, Serena consults the chart to find out whose Talking Turn it is. The child talks for a few minutes and each child asks questions based on what the class heard. The children love having their "moment in the sun" with all their classmates listening closely. Serena helps them learn to listen closely and ask good questions when it is their turn.



Joining in by Speech Box

Four-year-old Arthur uses assisted communication instead of traditional speech. His teacher, Polly, makes sure he gets his chance to "talk" as much as the other children in his class. With Arthur's parents, Polly has programmed his speech box to express his wants and needs when he presses the buttons. He also has a set of buttons just for mealtimes. This allows him to join in his friends' conversations. They can talk about whether something they are eating is hot, cold, sweet, or salty. Polly makes sure Arthur can join in when the class reads a book as a group, too. She programs words in his speech box ahead of time. This way, when the other students are filling in words at the end of familiar lines, Arthur can as well. Sometimes other children in the class like using Arthur's speech box. These opportunities are helping turn Arthur into a regular "talker."

