Especially for practitioners working with toddlers!

One at a Time

Talking and Listening

The toddlers in your care are beginning to interact with you and each other in more direct, meaningful ways. They still need lots of practice communicating effectively. One of the key elements of communication for toddlers is learning to take turns in conversations and in play.

What is the practice?

Give your toddlers a head start at learning to communicate. Play games and do activities that help them use language with you and each other. Provide everyday experiences that help them begin to understand conversational rules (for example, that only one person talks at a time). Toddlers who have lots of opportunities to interact verbally with others have an easier time learning to read and write later on.

What does the practice look like?

Encourage toddlers in your care to practice using language appropriately. You can do this by helping your toddlers share a toy while talking about what they are doing. Organize a bean-bag-tossing or ball-kicking game. At circle time give each child a chance to speak or share.

How do you do the practice?

Your daily classroom routine includes lots of opportunities for toddlers to practice turn-taking skills. You can do it formally at group time or when outside playing a special game. You can help toddlers practice during everyday free play interactions.

- When you have a group of toddlers together for story time, let each child have an opportunity to turn a page. Allow time for him to comment on what is happening on the page. Learning to wait for a turn in a group is challenging for many toddlers, so the groups should be small (3-4 children) at first.

- There are lots of chances outside to practice these skills. With a group of children, have them roll, kick, or toss a ball to each other. Encourage them to use language by asking questions like “Who has the ball?” and commenting on the progress of the game.

- While your children are playing in classroom centers, you can encourage language and further creative play by taking turns using objects with which they are playing. Be sure to follow their interests. For example, if several children are playing with trucks, you can ask for a turn with the truck. Play with the truck in a manner similar to what the children are already doing. Describe your actions and then hand the truck back.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Do toddlers in your class use and understand language related to turn-taking?
- Do they describe to you and to others what they are doing while playing?
- Do they enjoy playing alongside peers and/or adults in a collaborative way?
Take a look at more taking turns with toddlers

Ball Passing Plus

Lucie loves playing games with Jorge, her early intervention home visitor, and her mom. Her favorite has them all sit in a circle and pick one thing to talk about while they roll a ball among them. Today her mom picks the topic. “Everyone say one food you like to eat,” she says, and rolls the ball to Lucie. “Cup cakes!” Lucie says. “Good!” says Jorge. “Now roll it to me, and I’ll say what I like.” They play like that until they run out of foods they like. Mom finds some bean bags in Lucie’s toy box. She says, “We can toss these and name animals. You start, Lucie. Toss one to Jorge and name an animal.” Lucie and her mom have learned lots of these games. They play them often during the week.

Sharing Doll Care

Katie and her mom eagerly greet Dan, Katie’s home visitor, at the door. “Whenever you come, Katie gets so excited.” Dan settles himself on the floor next to Katie and her mom. He asks Katie what she has been playing with today. Katie picks up her rag doll from the couch and brings it to Dan. “Baby,” she says. “What a beautiful baby,” Dan responds. “May I hold her?” Katie nods, so Dan rocks the doll for a moment, then asks, “Do you want her back?” Katie reaches for the doll and passes it to her mom, who also rocks it. “Tell Dan your baby’s name,” Mom suggests. “Her Katie too,” Katie says, reaching for the doll again. “Is it your turn now?” her mom asks. They each take turns rocking and pretending to feed the doll, asking Katie questions, and making comments to practice using language.

I’m Ready for More!

Carmen, a 2-year-old with motor impairments, is always glad to see her home visitor, Danielle. This afternoon, Carmen has lots of energy and does not want to sit still for very long. “She’s been at it all day,” Carmen’s mom says. “Lots of energy.” “You’re in a silly mood today, aren’t you?” Danielle asks, and tickles Carmen, who is on her back on the grass in the backyard. Carmen laughs loudly and kicks her legs. “More tickle,” she shouts. “Nope,” Danielle says. “Your turn. You tickle me.” Carmen struggles upright with a little help and tickles Danielle, who makes a production of laughing and falling on the ground. “My turn!” Carmen calls. “What about your mom?” Danielle asks. “Tickle Mommy!” Carmen exclaims, and over her mom’s laughing objections, Carmen pulls her into the game for her turn.
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Hear This!

Talking and Listening

Toddlers are beginning to experiment with all the different uses of language. One of the most important skills for them to learn is how to listen. In order to become fluent speakers, toddlers need to learn to tell the difference between sounds. They need to understand what others are saying to them.

What is the practice?

You can give toddlers the opportunity to listen to language in different contexts, and to act on what they hear. Helping them listen for sounds — including rhymes — is an important part of toddlers’ developing language. Sounds occur in everyday speech and in songs, nursery rhymes, stories, and poems.

What does the practice look like?

There are many everyday examples of ways to increase toddlers’ listening skills. Play Simon Says and other listening games. Provide toddlers with music and stories on tape or CD. Be sure to reinforce their understanding with prompt feedback.

How do you do the practice?

Toddlers learn listening best when they are actively engaged in a fun, developmentally appropriate activity geared to their interests.

- Simon Says is a game that has infinite variations for toddlers. It can help them learn body parts, directional words (up, down, over, under, etc.), and descriptive words (fast, slow, etc.). Give your children the chance to take turns being Simon. Encourage them to listen to each other, not just to you.
- Play games that allow toddlers to listen to and produce variations in speech. Include whispering and shouting, talking quickly and slowly, and making high and low voices. Help them practice identifying the differences when they hear them.
- Recite short poems or nursery rhymes with your children while encouraging them to act them out. They have to figure out what actions to do as they listen to the words. Songs or fingerplays with movement are also good for encouraging listening and keeping toddlers interested.
- Help toddlers listen for individual sounds. Draw out words very slowly and then ask them to speed them up, or say them just as slowly. Emphasize rhyming words in songs or poems and point out the sounds that are the same.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Do the children in your care enjoy playing listening games like Simon Says?
- Do they begin to identify the difference between ‘loud’ and ‘soft’ noises, and other opposites?
- Do they take part in acting out movements corresponding to the words in stories, poems or songs?
Take a look at more verbal play with toddlers

Listening and Transitions
To help with transitions in Ella’s toddler class, she and Mike, the center’s early interventionist, make up some listening games. These help focus the children. When it is time to move from one activity or location to another, Ella or Mike starts a game. One of them says to the whole class, “If you can hear the sound of my voice, clap your hands.” The adult claps once to demonstrate. Soon all the children begin clapping. They are then given the next instruction, “If you can hear my voice, put your hands over your head.” The game goes on with different movements until all the children are focused and participating. Sometimes Mike and Ella change the game by whispering instead of talking, or using only hand movements or silly movements. The children know this game means they are about to do something new. The adults even see the toddlers imitating the game with each other.

Rhyme Time
Eloi, 30 months old, is working on a bear puzzle with his home visitor, Dave. The three bears are Eloi’s favorite characters right now. As Eloi works on finding the right puzzle pieces, he sing-songs quietly, “Bear, bear, bear.” He looks up and says, “Bear, hair.” “You’re rhyming, aren’t you?” Dave asks. “Do bear and pear sound the same?” “Bear, pear, bear, pear” Eloi says. “All the same.” “What about bear and dog?” Dave asks. Eloi laughs. “Not same,” he says. They try out different rhyming and non-rhyming words as they work on the puzzles.

Signs Aid ‘Listening’
Maggie is a 32-month-old with a hearing impairment in an inclusive toddler class. Her early interventionist, Ms. Shannon, comes to Maggie’s class to work with her. She is also helping Maggie’s teacher, Mr. David, with his sign language. Maggie loves playing games at circle time. Mr. David plays a song about different animals. The children all imitate his signs along with the movements in the song. “Fly like a bird, everyone,” Mr. David signs and says, and the children pretend to fly in their circle. The signing in this game allows Maggie to “listen” to the song’s instructions. She can act out all the animal parts along with the other children. Ms. Shannon lets Maggie touch speakers to feel the vibrations and taps out rhythms on Maggie’s arm. They also play together with different instruments.