



Moving Beyond the “Here-and-Now”: Using Language for Thinking and Learning

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Children’s early conversations tend to revolve around things in their immediate environment, like their toys, food, familiar people, and daily routines. Eventually, though, they need to learn to talk about things beyond the “here-and-now.” They need to develop language that allows them to talk about things they can’t see or touch in their physical surroundings. We call this *language for thinking and learning*.

Language for thinking and learning (also called “decontextualized language”) allows children to talk about more complicated topics, describe things they’ve seen or experienced, have longer conversations, think through problems, and tell stories. This type of language allows them to learn about the world.

In order to understand and use language for thinking and learning, there are many things that children need to be able to do, including:

- talk about **past experiences** (“I saw a panda bear at the zoo.”)
- talk about things that might happen in the **future** (“We’re going camping tomorrow.”)
- **explain** (“I need a blue crayon so I can colour the sky.”)
- talk about **feelings** (“I’m excited to go on the airplane!”)
- use language to **solve problems** (“I can use tape to fix my picture where it’s ripped.”)
- **describe** (“The mud was cold and squishy.”)
- **pretend** (“My teddy is hungry and wants a snack.”)
- use language to **predict** (“I think he’s going to sneak out of his cage.”)

Why is this type of language important?

The type of language used for thinking and learning is key to children's literacy development and their success at school [1]. In fact, it's been shown to predict how well children learn "academic language" [2], which is the type of language found in textbooks and used by teachers. When children have difficulty with academic language, it's difficult for them to understand and think about the teacher's explanations and instructions. It also affects their ability to understand what they read, and to think about the content in a variety of ways.

Children with language delays sometimes struggle with academic language [3]. However, there are things you can do early on to help a child develop this type of language. By using language for thinking and learning yourself during your conversations with your child, you will put him on a path to learn about this important type of language, which will eventually help him learn about academic language.

References

1. Weitzman, E. & Greenberg, J.(2010). *ABC and Beyond™: Building Emergent Literacy in Early Childhood Settings*. Toronto, Ontario: Hanen Early Language Program.
2. Uccelli, P., Demir-Lira, Ö. E., Rowe, M. L., Levine, S. and Goldin-Meadow, S. (2018), Children's Early Decontextualized Talk Predicts Academic Language Proficiency in Midadolescence. *Child Development*. E-publication ahead of print: doi:10.1111/cdev.13034.
3. van Kleeck, A. (2014). Distinguishing between casual talk and academic talk beginning in the preschool years: An important consideration for speech-language pathologists. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 23, 724-741.
4. Greenberg, J. & Weitzman, E. (2014). *I'm Ready!™ How to Prepare Your Child for Reading Success*. Toronto, Ontario: Hanen Early Language Program.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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