

How do we support children's sustained shared thinking?

Sustained shared thinking is strongly associated with high-quality teaching and learning for young children. Children who engage in sustained shared conversations are more likely to do well in school and life.

Sustained shared conversation is about engaging in extra talk, rather than just responding to directions such as 'put your jacket on', 'pick up', 'clean up', 'do this', 'don't do that' etc. Professor Iram Siraj-Blatchford defines it as an episode in which two or more individuals (children together, or adults and children) 'work together' in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities or extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking, and it must develop and extend.

Some strategies staff in services could use when they are engaging in sustained shared conversations with children include:

- **Tuning in:** listening carefully to what is being said, observing body language and what the child is doing.
- **Showing genuine interest:** giving their whole attention to the child, maintaining eye contact, affirming, smiling, nodding.
- **Respecting children's own decisions and choices by inviting children to elaborate:** saying things like 'I really want to know more about this' and listening and engaging in the response.
- **Re-capping:** 'So you think that ...'
- **Offering the adult's own experience:** 'I like to listen to music when I cook supper at home.'
- **Clarifying ideas:** 'Right Darren, so you think that this stone will melt if I boil it in water?'
- **Suggesting:** 'You might like to try doing it this way.'
- **Reminding:** 'Don't forget that you said that this stone will melt if I boil it.'
- **Using encouragement to further thinking:** 'You have really thought hard about where to put this door in the palace – where will you put the windows?'
- **Offering an alternative viewpoint:** 'Maybe Goldilocks wasn't naughty when she ate the porridge?'
- **Speculating:** 'Do you think the three bears would have liked Goldilocks to come to live with them as their friend?'
- **Reciprocating:** 'Thank goodness that you were wearing wellington boots when you jumped in those puddles Kwame. Look at my feet, they are soaking wet!'
- **Asking open questions:** 'How did you ...?' 'Why does this ...?' 'What happens next?' 'What do you think?' 'I wonder what would happen if ...?'
- **Modelling thinking:** 'I have to think hard about what I do this evening. I need to take my dog to the vet because he has a sore foot, take my library books back to the library and buy some food for dinner tonight. But I just won't have time to do all of these things.'

Using positive questioning

- 'I don't know, what do you think?'
- 'That's an interesting idea.'
- 'I like what you have done there.'
- 'Have you seen what X has done – why?'
- 'I wondered why you had ... ?'
- 'I've never thought about that before.'
- 'You've really made me think.'
- 'What would happen if we did ... ?'

Making-sense words

- I think
- I agree
- I imagine
- I disagree
- I like
- I don't like
- I wonder

This material comes from [Professor Iram Siraj-Blatchford's presentation on Quality Interactions in the Early Years](#) (PDF) at the TACTYC Annual Conference, 'Birth to Eight Matters! Seeking Seamlessness – Continuity? Integration? Creativity?' 5 November 2005, Cardiff.

Other strategies used in the High/Scope program that can help support sustained shared conversations include:

- Repeat/use children's words – restate.
- Be active about introducing new and interesting words to children.
- Limit questioning – sometimes it makes children feel as if they are being quizzed.
- Encourage children to describe their efforts, ideas and products.
- Use encouragement rather than praise – too much praise can be insidious in that it can make children dependent on it.
- When using praise, be specific – focus on children's actions and what they are doing rather than whether the adult is pleased. Rather than saying 'that's a lovely painting' try something like 'I wonder how you made all of the layers of colour in this corner' – this sort of approach shows the teachers real interest and leads to natural conversation.