



Importance of Language in Early Childhood Programs

Oral Language is one of the most important tools in teaching and nurturing children. Think of the many conversations heard around an early childhood space. There are conversations between children, conversations between caregivers and children, toddlers babbling, and providers engaging in the practice of “self-talk” with infants. Most of us working in the early childhood field know that “talking” to children is important. We spend most of our days engaging in conversations. However, what are the long-term effects of a language rich environment? What are the long-term effects when children lack exposure to a language-rich environment? In addition, what about the quality of the language used in classrooms?

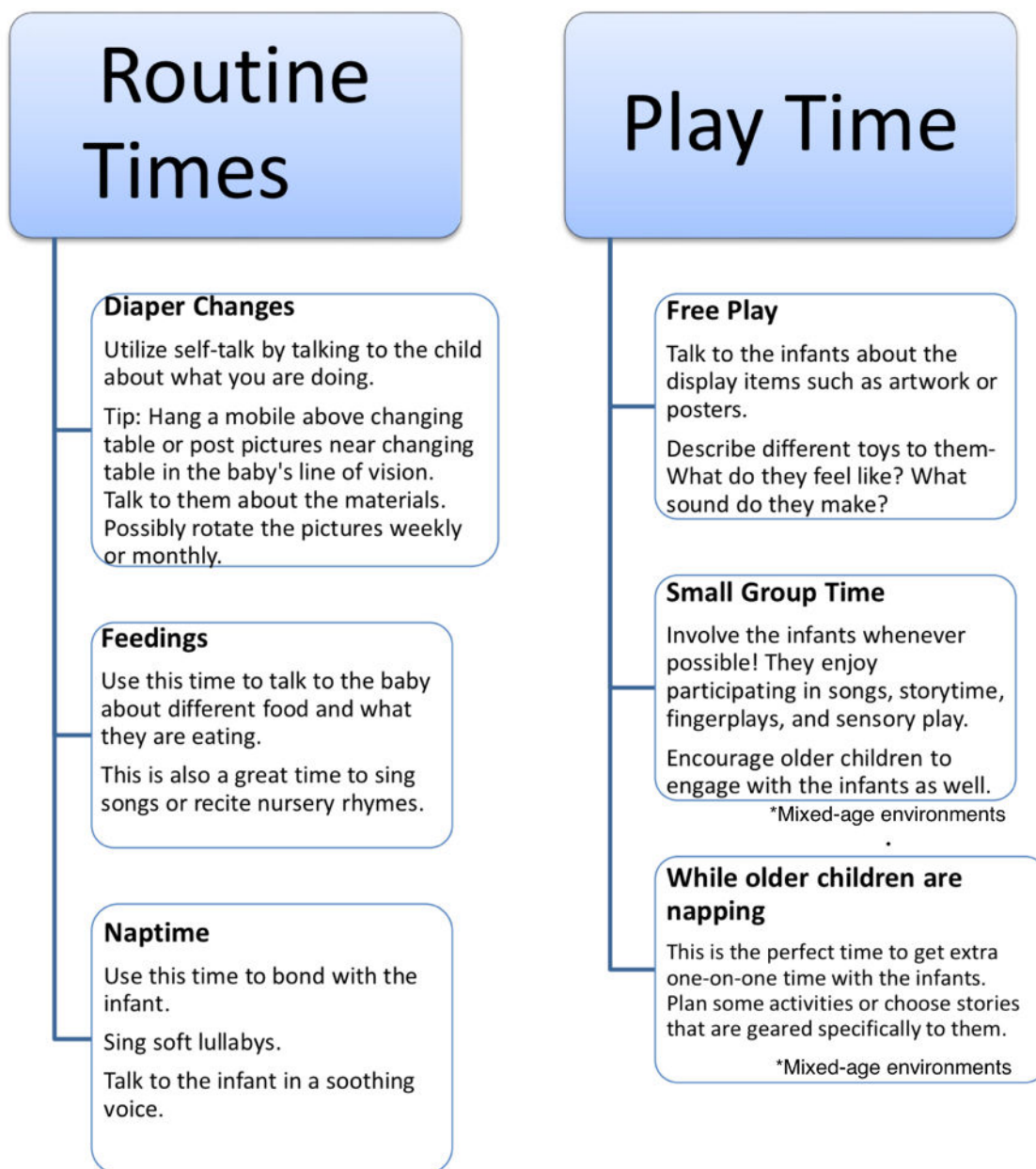
Betty Hart and Todd Risley conducted research to find out the effects of language exposure in the early years. After 2.5 years of tracking language exposure in 42 families (professional, working class, and low socio-economic statuses), they found that by age 3 there was a 30 million word gap between children from professional families and children from families on welfare. This trend continued into the school age years. We know that poverty and other stresses in the home can have a negative effect on language acquisition for various reasons. This adds to the importance of quality interactions in early childhood programs.

We must be intentional in our conversations with children. Thinking about the typical structure of a day in an early childhood classroom, there are many opportunities for quality interactions during both play times and routines. Of course interactions may differ depending on the age of the children.

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INFANTS

With infants, it is important to use real talk and “baby talk”. Routine times are great opportunities to utilize “self talk”; describing what you are doing while gathering diapering supplies or preparing a bottle. When infants begin babbling or using “baby talk”, caregivers can encourage them by repeating the sounds back to them. Below is a chart to with some ideas on how to support infant language acquisition throughout the day.



TODDLERS

Many children begin using expressive language during the toddler years, making it extremely important to encourage them to communicate with both the provider, and other children. This is a time to look at each child individually, meet them where they are, and then challenge them. It is important to give them a chance to respond to questions and to find a balance between listening and talking. Below are some examples of using language with toddlers.

USING LANGUAGE WITH TODDLERS

Address children individually, by name. This ensures the child knows that the communication is directed towards him/her.

Example: During morning greeting, “Good morning Emma! How are you today?”

Use descriptive words including specific object names, size, shape, color, texture, and sound.

Example: Jake, I see you are playing with the big, red truck

Give the child words to describe their feelings.

Example: When a child misses their parent, “James I can tell you are feeling sad. Can I give you a hug?”

Add words to actions during routine times. Talk to the children about diaper changing process and describe the food that is served during mealtimes.

Example: During diaper changes, “Eva, I’m going to wipe your bottom and then put on a clean diaper.”

Add words to actions during play. Talk to the children about different materials, display, and activities.

Example: In dramatic play, “Logan, I see you are rocking the baby. Is he sleepy?”

Engage the toddlers with simple questions and provide answers when necessary.

Example: “Where is your nose? Here is your nose!”



PRESCHOOL

As children reach preschool age providers should be focusing on open-ended, more complex questions. It is important for them to engage in conversation with the provider and their peers. There may be times when providers are so busy with the routines of the day that they may forget the importance of these verbal interactions. The following chart gives examples of questions/ways to prompt children. These prompts can be written on index cards to keep around the classroom in places where teachers can easily access them.

CONVERSATION PROMPTS

What would you like to be when you grow up?	If you had one wish, what would it be?
Tell me about the book you are reading.	What is something that made you smile today?
Can you tell me about something nice that you did for a friend today?	What is the best thing about going to preschool?
If you could be an animal what would it be? Why?	If you could have one super power, what would it be? Why?
Can you tell me about something nice that a friend did for you?	What are some things that are special about your family?
If you had wings where would you fly?	What is your favorite thing to do with mommy/daddy (or another family member)?
Tell me about your favorite thing to do outside.	Tell me about your favorite thing to do inside.

Lastly, children of all ages need affirmations and encouragement. This can be verbal or nonverbal. Children are more likely to thrive in an environment in which they feel loved and supported. This is especially true for our children coming from vulnerable families.

I encourage you to take some time this week to reflect on your conversations with the children in your care. Challenge yourself to be intentional and identify potential areas for growth. And remember that while talking and facilitating is important, we must not forget to actively listen to what our children have to say.