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# Constructivist Teaching by Heart

*Newsletter, May 2026*

*"Putting children at the center of learning."*

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## Children Need to Talk More

Our most recent *Constructivist Teaching by Heart* newsletter was titled "*Sometimes I Think We Talk Too Much.*" In this newsletter, I (Dana) addressed how teachers are still often doing most of the talking in the classroom. Then, a few weeks ago, right after we published that piece, an article in Education Week caught my eye:

[Kindergarteners Aren't Talking Enough in Class. Why That Matters.](#) by Elizabeth Heubeck. This topic is a great follow-up to our previous newsletter about

leaving ample room for children's voices in the classroom.



The Education Week piece explores the importance of children's everyday conversations, mentioning a study conducted through classroom observations to identify instances in which teachers "deliberately encouraged extended conversations among students." Far too few instances were found. This is disheartening because oral language development is the foundation for literacy and vocabulary learning. Our classrooms and curriculum need to provide abundant opportunities for children to practice oral language.

This issue extends beyond kindergarten. At every grade level, there is often too much emphasis on isolated skill work, screen time, and keeping classrooms quiet. In many whole-group lessons, most of the talking is still done by the teacher, with students asked only to parrot back, offer the only right answer, or respond briefly to the teacher's question. Worksheets typically reinforce the same quiet, isolated work, and computer programs often serve as digital worksheets, again with minimal talk. As a result, very little student conversation takes place in many of our classrooms.

The article quoted Ellen Frede, an early-learning research professor for the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, who stated, "I think, sadly, the emphasis on literacy has actually exacerbated the reduction in conversations. Teachers...often feel pressed for time under curriculum pacing guides and accountability demands, leading to more whole-group instruction and less student talk." Cabell went on to say, "Much of that time focuses on decoding and understanding written text, but children develop vocabulary and syntax—the building blocks of comprehension—through conversation."



Conversation between students and teachers enables children to learn to think about new learning, build on previous learning, develop opinions, and navigate social situations. Children need to use new vocabulary, learn expressive language, and formulate independent ideas. These are skills that they will use for a lifetime.

Furthermore, open-ended, authentic, play-based activities help children develop language skills. Student-initiated activities that encourage discussion and debate foster conversational ability. Talking and reading are interconnected. Projects offer many directions for children to act on their own ideas and share their learning.

Reflecting on this brought me back to the Stages of Play—the sequence of steps that we all progress through as we learn to negotiate open-ended or informal situations. The lowest level of play is the Unoccupied stage, where a child stands alone, appears uncomfortable, and is unsure how to initiate play while others are engaged. In contrast, the highest level is Cooperative Play, the culmination of many awkward, messy interactions. At this stage, at least one participant discovers that play is more enjoyable when there is a shared goal. I can't emphasize strongly enough what a milestone this is in the development of a child.

Here is an example of working toward a shared goal that I observed in a Kindergarten classroom. Three children selected the Family Center during their choice time: one girl, Ashley, and two boys. The two boys rushed to their learning center as soon as they were dismissed and began to play a wild superhero activity. Meanwhile, Ashley wanted to play "family". That was her goal. With one clear idea in mind, she knew it would take all her cooperative play skills to pull this off. First, she handed out roles of family members and the boys agreed. Then she talked with the boys about what they wanted to do. If she let her guard down as she focused on her doll, the superheroes would slip back into kicks and chops, but Ashley was up to the task.

It is important not to lose sight of what Ashley was doing in this scenario. She had a goal and was exercising her leadership skills, which required many back-and-forth conversations with her superhero peers. Their discussions—about what to cook for dinner, how to care for the children, and where to put the groceries—were authentic. Ashley was working at that cooperative level of development. This was not scripted or fill-in-the-blanks; it was independent classroom talk. The teacher shared that Ashley's mother had recently had a baby, explaining why Ashley was motivated to model what she saw at home—a common occurrence when children are given the opportunity to play and talk.



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Real talk can go on throughout the school day. Book discussions are real talk. Sharing news during a class meeting is real talk. Playing math games, working in small groups to complete a project, turn-and-talk times, and discussing writing are all opportunities for children to talk.

I often ask teachers what the one thing their students like to do most. And universally, at every age level, teachers say the one thing their students like to do most is talk. Ironically, talking is one aspect of learning that educators can be reticent to encourage. Yet the results are in: encouraging student talk across the school day leads to enhanced learning, social skills, and student engagement in learning. It doesn't have to be loud, but children need and want to talk, and when teachers listen, we find out who they are, what they know, and where we could go next to build on their learning.



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### ***Children Need to Talk More Reflection Questions:***

When do your students have authentic conversations in the classroom?



When you were a student, what was your experience with classroom conversations? What can you replicate? What can you improve on?



What have you noticed about your students' development in discussing, verbal problem solving, and managing social situations? Where can you add more opportunities to talk?

*We want to hear from you!*

*Share your comments about this newsletter topic, **Children Need to Talk More, here.***



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## Q & A: Ask Krista & Dana...

**Q:** I have been noticing that my kindergarten students are having trouble working out their disagreements on the playground and in the classroom. They tend to “take their toys and go home”, or in other words, isolate themselves rather than working things out. A few children seem to be always on the sidelines, watching the others interact. How do I encourage the students to work and learn together more?



**A:** Your question gets right to the heart of learning and growing as a social being and academically. There are stages children work through to become a cooperative learner who can solve problems and work together for a common goal. It sounds like this is what you are striving to develop in your students. Review the following stages of play and think about ways you can encourage growth from one stage to another. Having choice learning centers is one way to encourage children to work together in small groups. Students can make a decision about where to go, plan what they will do and whom they will work with, and finally, share how it went in a class meeting when center time is over. Another strategy is to have book clubs, small projects, partners, and cooperative groups to support children’s development through the stages.

### A QUICK REVIEW OF THE STAGES OF PLAY:

|         |                   |   |
|---------|-------------------|---|
| Stage 1 | <i>Unoccupied</i> | <i>In this stage the child is not involved in any activity. They often stand away from the other children and look very uncomfortable.</i>  |
| Stage 2 | <i>Onlooker</i>   | <i>At this stage the child will move closer to children who are engaged in an activity and watch them closely, sometimes even make suggestions but there is no real engagement.</i> |
| Stage 3 | <i>Solitary</i>   | <i>Children play by themselves, sometimes with limited materials and seeming to not notice what others are doing.</i>   |



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| Stage 4 | <i>Parallel</i>    | <i>Often seen in five- and six-year-olds, this play has a group sharing materials but with no real purpose. Each child is doing their own thing but often talking to the others. "I'm making a cake." One child might say and another says, "I'm feeding the dinosaurs." Parallel play can get boisterous.</i>   |
| Stage 5 | <i>Associative</i> | <i>Like parallel play, students are sharing materials and having conversations with some shared purpose but no real goal. They may agree to put a fence around a play barn but can't agree on what animals will go into the area.</i>  |
| Stage 6 | <i>Cooperative</i> | <i>A goal is set by the students, and everyone is contributing to the goal. Often one child is the keeper of the goal and reminds the others to cooperate in achieving the goal. All the group feels a great sense of pride for their work and demonstrate a real attachment if there is a product. Sometimes one student has an idea for a game and convinces the others to follow his/her rules.</i> |

*Thanks for reading! Do you have comments, ideas, or questions for the newsletter? Submit [here!](#)*

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