

Encourage Child to Child Conversation at Mealtimes



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At the table, children are powerful models for each other. Peers are often more powerful models than teachers. Their thoughts about food carry big weight with each other. The teacher role is powerful in helping children develop skills for conversation with each other.

Strategies for encouraging child to child discussions

- Help children learn to know and call each others' names.
- Teach children to look at each other as they make requests for food or utensils.
- Help children take turns in conversation, by speaking, then listening to what the other person says. Hint: Help them practice these skills using echo songs during group times. We sing, and then you sing.
- Show children how to wait for each other to answer.
- Sometimes a child will not respond to another child. Repeat the other child's requests for food or utensils to the child. Then tell the child that another child is waiting to hear his/her thoughts.
- If children do not have words to carry out a conversation or make a request, suggest words for them to try.
- If the child to child conversation stalls, pick up the conversation by offering clarifying information, then toss the conversation ball back out to the children.
- Ask real questions for the children to answer and discuss. A real question is one where even you don't know the answer.

Extend child to child conversations

Watch for opportunities to pick up what a child says. Toss the topic back on the table for children to discuss further. For example, Thomas says, "I like green beans. My grandma grew some. We picked them off the bush." You say, "Thomas said he likes beans because he picked some off the bush. What do you think about that?"

Interpret impolite table talk for learning opportunities

Sometimes children bring up words that may be impolite for table talk. Children may delight in talking about blood, vomit, pooh-pooh, and other dramatic topics. Children may be teasing, but they are typically genuinely interested in questions about body functions, including digestion and indigestion! Rarely do young children bring up such topics or words just to be disgusting.

Because children are powerful and influential models for each other, such stimulating and interesting talk can spread rapidly among the children. These impolite topics hold their attention! An observant teacher will discern the intent of the talk. Then, the teacher will decide strategies to use to extend the talk, or not, or even to stop the talk.

Teacher Talk

Descriptive Reinforcement and Encouragement

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Setting a mealtime environment to promote competence and self-control in children is a goal of many early childhood programs. The things adults say to children have impact on their motivation to try new things and to become competent and self-controlled

Intentional and thoughtfully planned teacher talk can be descriptively reinforcing for children as they learn.

Assist self-regulation. Help children think about what they are doing. Rather than saying, "I think you are such a good girl for helping out with snack," it is more effective to say, "It looks like you are finishing cutting the pizza. You cut up five pieces of pizza. You made something for everyone to eat."

Be specific. Describe the mealtime task the child is doing. Reinforce what children are accomplishing by specifically describing their action. "You are using the soap and hot water. You are scrubbing your hands. You cleaned the fronts and backs of your hands." This leads the child through the challenge and at the same time focuses her on what is working. Intentionally decide what skills you are hoping to reinforce. Then choose the actions you will descriptively reinforce.

Avoid insincere or empty evaluative comments. Too much empty discussion about a child's attempts and accomplishments results in feelings of emptiness. Adjectives such as "good" and "bad" give little information to a child about the tasks that they are working on acquiring. Be specific and descriptive in your comments.

Avoid comparisons between children as you describe behaviors. Make comparisons about the child's skills over time, rather than about the child's skills in relation to someone else's skills. "You are the best meat cutter in the school," is an inappropriate comparison because it sets an almost impossible standard for the child to meet. "You cut your meat without any help today," is descriptive and targeted to the child's skill.

Give private feedback. Children may be placed in groups for society's purposes, but learning is an individual effort. Look for the tasks that a child is working on, then, give him descriptive reinforcements as he attempts the tasks.

Think about building a child's sense of self-control, independence, competence, and confidence around eating and mealtimes in the group setting. Watch for successes. Help the child identify eating success through descriptive reinforcement, and watch the confidence rise. A logical sequence unfolds. A risk is taken and successfully achieved, competence is established, confidence follows, and another risk is ready to be taken.