REALIZING THE PROMISE OF OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

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Asking the question "Did you like the book?" allows a child to respond "yes" or "no," yet asking the child to explain why the carrot seed grew results in very different conversations.

Developing language, including vocabulary and grammar, is a key task for young children. Early language skills allow children to learn from and with others and also lay the critical foundation for success in learning to read (Dickinson, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2010). Research has clearly demonstrated that conversations with others allow children to use language in purposeful and meaningful ways, building early language and vocabulary skills (Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012).

One strategy for fostering these language-building conversations is asking open-ended questions. Open-ended questions (or open-ended prompts, as described in this article), in theory, provide opportunities for children to express their ideas and to receive feedback from adults and peers on what they have shared. Early childhood teachers are urged to use open-ended prompts, and guidance for using open-end prompts is included in high-quality preschool programs such as Opening the World of Learning (OWLS; Schickedanz & Dickinson, 2005), in the Common Core State Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), and in many state literacy guidelines (see Kentucky, Tennessee, and New Jersey for examples). Yet in practice, many teachers struggle to ask a variety of open-ended prompts in the classroom (Smith & Dickinson, 1994). Moreover, even when teachers pose these prompts, they often do not wait for children's responses or do not provide quality feedback on children's responses that would effectively scaffold children's language learning (Wasik & Hindman, 2011a; Wasik & Iannone-Campbell, 2012).

Many recent interventions have focused primarily on encouraging teachers to pose open-ended prompts without providing practical guidance on (a) how to fit

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these prompts into the busy classroom day or (b) how to ensure that children respond and receive feedback on their responses. This article addresses this gap by explaining how language learning contributes to the development of reading skills and then describing the unique benefits of open-ended prompts for building language. Finally, we highlight several suggestions for effectively implementing open-ended prompts in ways that engender classroom conversations, describe potential challenges that teachers might face, and propose solutions for each challenge.

Importance of Language Development in Early Childhood Settings

Oral language is one of the most important assets that humans have. The ability to communicate with one another in completely original ways allows us to learn and share complex ideas (Hoff, 2009). Two broad categories of skills characterize oral language: vocabulary, or knowing the meaning of words, and grammar, or knowing how words go together into phrases and sentences. Both vocabulary and grammar are learned primarily through interacting with other people who are expert users of language. In particular, conversations allow us to hear others use words and to interpret their meaning and then to practice using words to express our own ideas (Huttenlocher, Waterfall, Vasilyeva, Vevea, & Hedges, 2010). In fact, evidence suggests that meaningful conversations represent the primary mechanisms through which children build oral language skills in the early years of life (Hart & Risley, 1995).

Moreover, research has clearly established that oral language development sets the stage for learning to read. One reason is that beginning readers with well-developed vocabularies will decode (or sound out) a word more easily than peers because they have stronger phonological awareness skills (Lonigan, 2009; Metsala, 2011). Furthermore, once they have decoded the word, children with stronger vocabularies will more quickly recognize its meaning, whereas children with smaller vocabularies will need to spend more time figuring out what the word means (Byrnes & Wasik, 2009).

Consequently, children with less vocabulary knowledge have less cognitive energy left over to devote to comprehension and fluency. These early differences in reading skill often persist. For example, research shows that initial success in reading strongly predicts later reading success, as children who start out reading well learn even more about vocabulary words and grammatical structures from their reading and glean more academic content from texts (Stanovich, 1986). Therefore, beginning readers need a strong foundation in oral language skills so that they can become effective and efficient readers.

Unfortunately, research has shown that early childhood settings do not always support children's development of oral language, especially in environments serving our most vulnerable children (Justice, Mashburn, Hamre, & Pianta, 2008; Neuman & Dwyer, 2009). One challenge to oral language development in classrooms is that teachers do most of the talking. For example, studies of preschool classrooms serving children in poverty have shown that about 93% of all of the talk in classrooms is by teachers, leaving very little opportunity for children to engage in conversations in which they hear language and share their own ideas (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001).

A second challenge is that much of the talk that teachers provide is not rich in vocabulary and complex grammar but is instead simple language focused on behavior management (Gest, Holland-Coviello, Welsh, Eicher-Catt, & Gill, 2006). For example, teachers often give children directions (e.g., "Sit down," or "Put that away"), respond to misbehavior (e.g., "Please raise your hand rather than calling out"), or provide generic praise to foster compliance (e.g., "I love the way that Damonte is sitting with his hands in his lap"). Although understanding and following rules is an essential part of children's success in school, teachers may use this type of talk to the exclusion of other, richer discussion of content. Consequently, children might have few, if any, openings to hear vocabulary words that they may not already know and to use language, including these vocabulary words, to voice their own thoughts.

A third challenge is that these high amounts of teacher-directed management-focused talk leave little time for explicitly discussing vocabulary words. Specifically, research (Beck & McKeown, 2007; Biemiller, 2001; Champion, Hyter, McCabe, & Bland-Stewart, 2003; Cunningham, Zibulsky, Stanovich, & Stanovich, 2009; Juel, Biancarosa, Coker, & Deffes, 2003)

Pause and Ponder

- Review your day. How many open-ended prompts did you ask your children?

- When a child responded to you, how did you follow up with meaningful feedback?

- What did you learn about your students by asking open-ended prompts?

- In asking open-ended prompts, did you encourage children to use vocabulary words that you were working on in the classroom?

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shows that fewer than 10 minutes per day in many early childhood classrooms are dedicated to explaining new words and allowing children to use those words with teachers or peers. Moreover, even if teachers devote time to hearing and using vocabulary and grammar, the quality of instruction may be low, with very short conversations or few chances for children to talk (La Paro et al., 2009; Wasik & Iannone- Campbell, 2012). Unfortunately, this low quality might be especially prevalent in early-childhood settings serving children in poverty (Justice et al., 2008); this is particularly troubling because these children may rely more heavily on preschool to provide word-learning opportunities that are not available at home (Hart & Risley, 1995).

As a consequence of these challenges, most early-childhood settings have null or small impacts on children's oral language skills (Skibbe, Connor, Morrison, & Jewkes, 2012). For example, the large-scale Preschool Curriculum Evaluation Report (PCERC, 2008) examined several evidence-based curricula and found that none significantly advanced children's vocabulary. In addition, the evaluation of the Early Reading First initiative (Jackson et al., 2007) showed that, of more than 100 programs designed to build children's language skills, just a few successfully built vocabulary (although, as in the PCER study, many had positive effects on other outcomes).

Finally, reviews of data from the Head Start preschool program have identified small, positive effects of

business-as-usual preschool instruction on children's vocabulary skills (Wasik & Hindman, 2011b; 2012), but these effects were not large enough to close the gap between these children and their more affluent peers in just one or two years of preschool. Critically, very few curricula or research interventions have targeted children's grammatical skills (but see Vasilyeva & Waterfall, 2011, for several smaller scale studies forging new understandings on this front), suggesting that teachers may need to independently focus on these outcomes.

Therefore, it is clear that early-childhood classrooms need to build children's language skills through conversations, but that there are missed opportunities in the field, particularly for our most vulnerable learners. In the remainder of this article, we explain why and how open-ended prompts can be a valuable and practical mechanism for advancing early language skills.

Defining Open-Ended Prompts

An open-ended prompt is typically defined as a question or statement that generally has more than one correct answer and typically requires a multiple-word response. Open-ended prompts are often questions beginning with terms such as *why* and *how* but could also use words such as *who, what, when,* or *where.* For example, while reading *Where the Wild Things Are* (Sendak, 1963), a teacher could ask, "Why is Max getting sad?" or "What would you do if you could play with those Wild Things?"

In addition to questions, teachers might also make statements that invite children's elaborated responses. For example, the teacher could say, "Tell me about what you see on the cover of this book" or "Describe what the Wild Things are doing in this picture" or, in recapping the story after reading, "Give me an example of one way that Max created mischief." Because both open-ended questions and statements can launch conversations that allow children to hear and use language in meaningful ways, we call these open-ended prompts rather than open-ended *questions.*

Relative to other types of prompts, open-ended prompts are uniquely valuable for building language in the classroom (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001). Teachers often ask yes or no questions to test children's understanding, such as pausing while reading *Where the Wild Things Are* to ask, "Do those Wild Things look scary to you?" Responding to this question requires just one word, and children can easily say what another child nearby has said.

In other cases, teachers ask closed questions that have one correct answer usually requiring few words. These questions are excellent for checking children's content knowledge; for example, asking "What color is the suit that Max is wearing?" or "What is Max carrying in his hand?" reveals whether or not children can label particular colors or objects. However, neither prompt provides ample opportunity for children to hear and use multiple words in

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grammatically correct phrases or sentences as an open-ended prompt would.

Open-ended prompt starters such as *why* and *how* naturally call for relatively detailed descriptions or explanations, rather than simple statements. Children can not only use more words but also practice connecting language into phrases and sentences when they respond. In addition, because open-ended prompts target more complex ideas, they often allow for several answers that children can compare and contrast.

To more fully understand the unique benefits of open-ended prompts, compare the following prompts. If you ask a child, "Did you like the story we just read?" a typical response may be a simple "yes." However, questions such as "What did you like about the story?" or "Why did you like the story?" invite very different responses. The open-ended nature of these prompts provides children with more opportunities to use language to communicate their ideas and feelings and to use elaborated sentences, including vocabulary related to the story that they just heard.

Thus open-ended prompts are an important part of the classroom setting because they offer children the chance to talk and to share their ideas with friends. They also help teachers discover what children know about a topic and model for children how they can ask questions to learn new things. Finally, by posing open-ended prompts, teachers show their interest in children's ideas, building a positive, reciprocal relationship. Accordingly, a sizeable body of research shows that children's language and vocabulary skills benefit when teachers use open-ended prompts during book reading (Dickinson & Smith, 1994; Whitehurst, Arnold, et al., 1994; Whitehurst, Epstein, et al., 1994; Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998) and during

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conversations that extend into other classroom activities (Wasik & Bond, 2001).

Making the Most of Open-Ended Prompts

Teachers have become increasingly aware of the importance of presenting open-ended prompts. However, given recent data on the absence of child talk in classrooms, particularly in the context of extended conversations, it appears that teachers may not ask enough open-ended prompts or that they might ask the prompts but not allow children to respond or provide feedback that encourages children to think about what they said and elaborate further on their thoughts. Thus teachers may need some guidance in (a) how to construct open-ended prompts that would increase children's language and (b) how to build on children's responses to open-ended prompts in ways that genuinely scaffold children's language. Some suggestions follow for using open-ended prompts so teachers can increase children's opportunities to use language in meaningful ways.

Focus Your Prompts

Any topic in the classroom is a good topic about which to pose an open-ended prompt. For example, it is valuable to ask children to share information about what they did over the weekend or what their favorite food on the lunch table is. However, if teachers want children to learn specific language skills, including particular vocabulary words and concepts, then teachers need to focus their prompts on those words and ideas at least some of the time. In other words, teachers should devote special attention to asking open-ended prompts about the particular words and ideas that they are targeting in their lesson plans and ensure that children use the target words and ideas when responding.

Here's Why. Research from Beck and McKeown (2007) and colleagues indicates that children remember new words more clearly when they have multiple opportunities to use those words, including through answering questions about those words. They refer to this type of intensive, explicit, and planful focus on particular words as "rich instruction" to distinguish it from more natural conversations in the classroom.

Other more recent research (Coyne, Simmons, Kame'eni, & Stoolmiller, 2004; McCoach & Kapp, 2007; Silverman, 2007) supports these results and further affirms the value of intentionally asking multiple questions to help children use and remember the words and concepts targeted in the curriculum. Ensuring this level of focus on specific, target ideas typically requires extensive planning, both for a given day (e.g., what questions will be posed and when) as well as across the several weeks that comprise the theme (e.g., What ideas will be investigated, how concepts will unfold over time).

Table   Sample Prompts to Be Used Throughout the Day

Theme: Spring	*Target words*: breeze, flower, grass, leaf, petal, plant, rabbit, squirrel, stem
Area of classroom	Suggested prompts
Welcoming children	Tell me about your weekend! What signs of spring did you see on your way to school? Describe the animals that you saw on your way to school.
Circle time	How do we know that spring is on its way? Describe the parts of a flower.
Book reading	What signs of spring do you see on the cover of this book? How might the caterpillar on the cover change throughout the story?
Centers/small groups	Art area: Tell me about the flower you're drawing. Dramatic play: Gardeners, tell me what you will need to do to help your imaginary flowers grow. Science area: We have been growing bean seeds. Can you describe the different parts of our plant?
Transitions	When I point to you, tell us about your favorite sign of spring. As we're waiting, let's pretend to be rabbits. Tell me about what you're doing, little rabbits!
Lunch time	What plants are we eating for lunch? What parts of our lunch would a rabbit like to munch on? What would a caterpillar eat?
Gross motor activities	Let's move around like the warm spring breeze. Describe how you are moving! Today while we were outside, we hunted for acorns just like a squirrel. Tell me about where you found yours.

Here's How. Many early-childhood classrooms organize their instruction around themes or projects, and open-ended prompts should focus on the target learning objectives of these themes. For example, during a theme on spring that emphasizes words such as *flowers*, *grass*, and *grow*, teachers need to pose open-ended prompts that encourage children to think about these ideas and, ideally, to use these words in their responses. Prompts might include, "Describe some of the things that come out in the spring," which would scaffold children's use of the vocabulary words *grass* and *flower* in their answers. Later that day, the teacher might ask, "What signs of spring can you see around us?"

Several days later, after children have had some practice with these vocabulary words, the teacher might ask the more challenging question, "Why do we see so many more little rabbits and squirrels around the playground as the spring comes?" enabling children to think and talk about animals that benefit as these signs of spring come to pass. Certainly, teachers would still ask open-ended questions or prompts about content other than the theme (e.g., "Tell me about your weekend?") or ("What did you do over the weekend?"), but they should make an effort to focus many of their prompts on the theme vocabulary and concepts. This detailed planning, although a significant effort, is essential for ensuring that children's attention and talk are focused on the teachers' learning objectives.

The Table provides some sample prompts that could be used throughout the day to allow children to talk about the theme of spring.

Let Children Respond

Posing an open-ended prompt is only half of the equation; ensuring that children respond is equally—or in some ways, even more—important. Classrooms are busy places and, understandably, teachers often focus a lot of attention on keeping children engaged in tasks. However, the desire to keep classroom conversations under control and moving swiftly can result in too little time for child responses to open-ended prompts.

For example, teachers may be hesitant to allow one child to provide a multiple-sentence answer to an open-ended prompt because they fear that if this child talks too much, other children will lose focus. Similarly, teachers may be reluctant to allow multiple children to answer the same open-ended prompt because they worry that answers will be repeated and other children's attention will wander. Finally, after calling on a child who is slow to respond, teachers may be concerned about waiting in silence for more than one or two seconds and might interrupt the child's thinking to say, "We'll come back to you" to keep the dialog moving. All of these practices, although motivated by the important desire to keep the classroom running smoothly, have the potential to limit the value of open-ended prompts, which depends in large part on how children respond.

Here's Why. In a recent study, Wasik and Hindman (2011b) examined the role that open-ended prompts during book reading played in predicting young children's vocabulary gains over a year in preschool. Interestingly, results showed that asking more open-ended prompts did not necessarily result in greater vocabulary learning among children. In fact, some teachers asked more than 20 open-ended prompts during 1 book reading, but the children in their classrooms did not demonstrate stronger word learning than children in classrooms who heard only 5 open-ended questions.

Instead, what mattered for children's vocabulary development were the opportunities that children had to

respond to the open-ended prompts. When teachers allowed more children to respond to open-ended prompts—often by soliciting multiple answers to a particularly complex question or by asking follow-up questions after an initial open-ended prompt—children in their classrooms learned more vocabulary over the course of the year. Thus this study showed the unique value of child responses to open-ended prompts.

Here's How. Teachers should not simply ask open-ended prompts and move on; instead, they should foster as much child talk as possible in response to these prompts. One way to ensure that children get the chance to respond is to pose prompts and then allow multiple children to respond. Teachers can then compare and contrast children's ideas.

For example, imagine that a teacher is reading an informational book about spring for the first time. The teacher might ask children to describe what they see on the cover, taking responses from up to five children and encouraging each child to offer a different idea. She might then ask, "Considering what we see on the cover, what will we learn about in this book?" taking another five responses. This approach may take a bit more time, but by sometimes abbreviating or skipping repetitive questions such as queries about the parts of the book and the role of the author and illustrator, these extensive opportunities for responses and feedback can be possible at least several days per week.

> *"Keep children talking using the vocabulary and ideas of the lesson."*

It is also useful for teachers to consider "wait time" in the classroom. Children may need 10 or more seconds to process an open-ended prompt and think of a response. At least some of the time, teachers should allow slow-to-respond children this time, modeling for peers that it is important to wait for our friends to think. In addition, after composing their thoughts, children may need 10 or more seconds to articulate their ideas. As long as children are on topic, lengthy responses can be beneficial, allowing children to hear and use complex language and ideas. Teachers may need to practice this wait time so they can overcome any impulse to cut a child off to provide the child with the opportunity to express himself.

It is important to note that waiting for one or more children's responses can present a management challenge, and teachers may need specific management routines to facilitate these interactions. For example, helping children become "active listeners" can be useful. Teachers could remind children before and during the activity—whether a book reading, circle time, small group, or other situation—that, "In our class, we are active listeners who listen to the speaker with our ears, think about what is being said with our minds, and raise our hands to share an idea." This very concrete routine allows children to point to their own ears and mouths or look at relevant props (e.g.,

a doll, a face that is assembled piece by piece), and teachers could wordlessly remind children of the routine by pointing to their own ears or raising their hand.

Provide Meaningful Feedback
Sometimes teachers respond to children's input only with praise, such as "Great idea!" or "That's right!" Praise is important but it can be limiting, because it does not actually create the opportunity for children to respond, to use more language, or to learn the turn-taking of conversations. It is important that once teachers have children talking, they keep children talking using the vocabulary and ideas of the lesson. Therefore, praise should be used in conjunction with more complex feedback.

Here's Why. Evidence for the importance of multiple prompts is implicit in the work of Whitehurst and colleagues (1994; 1998), who determined that when parents and teachers asked more questions about a book, children were better able to converse with adults about the story and to systematically provide more and more language as the book reading went on. More explicit support for this suggestion comes from work by Justice and colleagues (Justice, Weber, Ezell, & Bakeman, 2002; Tompkins, Zucker, Justice, & Binici, 2012; Zucker, Justice, Piasta, & Kaderavek, 2010), who carefully examined adult–child conversations during

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book reading and found that adults' questions about a particular topic led children to talk more about that topic.

Here's How. Teachers should plan several thoughtful, open-ended prompts targeting key content and eliciting multiple child responses, as well as additional open-ended questions or remarks to follow up on each prompt and keep children talking. Offering at least three turns, or opportunities, for a child to talk in a conversation is an excellent way to ensure that children are using language and getting feedback.

For example, if a teacher initially asked, "Why do we see more insects in the spring than the winter?" she might plan to take multiple children's responses and then follow up by saying, "Describe some of the things that insects need to survive" as well as "How could insects hide from predators?" and "Tell me about some things that insects like to eat." This series of questions will carefully scaffold children's understanding of this complex theme-related idea while providing them with the opportunity to think deeply about the topic and to hear and use target vocabulary in multiple, meaningful ways.

Encourage Complete Sentences
Finally, although open-ended prompts have the advantage of allowing children to voice complex ideas, it is often possible for children to use just a few words when more are actually required.

Here's Why. Learning the grammar of language can be quite challenging for children, and practicing their use of language with appropriate, constructive feedback is a key component in mastering the rules (Ninio, 2011). If children only use a few words to respond to a question, they are not able to practice using language as fully as they should.

Here's How. Teachers should encourage children to use complete sentences. Whenever necessary, teachers should provide feedback that helps children with this task. For example, a teacher might finish the storybook *Butterfly, Butterfly* (Horacek, 2007) and ask, "What was your favorite part of the story?" A child might respond, "The pretty butterfly!" rather than stating, "I thought the butterfly at the end of the story was really pretty."

To encourage children to make the most of opportunities to use language afforded by open-ended prompts, teachers should encourage children to use complete sentences and model complete sentences in their own talk. It is important to note that children's grammar does not receive substantial focus in most early curricula, meaning that teachers' efforts to help children use appropriate grammar in conversations are particularly important.

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Overall, the critical message in the research is that the value of open-ended prompts is not entirely realized in all classrooms and that educators need to focus not only on posing these prompts but on ensuring that they ask about the most essential ideas, as well as monitoring and capitalizing on children's responses to these prompts. Taking these steps will foster the language development that is essential for reading and school success.

Overcoming Challenges to Open-Ended Prompts
Teachers are very aware of the value of open-ended prompts, and most express a desire to include them throughout the day. Why, then, does research show that they are fairly rare? There are many reasons; next we highlight some common challenges and suggest solutions to each one.

Challenge No. 1: Time Pressure
First, teachers of young children are pressed for time and have content they need to deliver quickly. It may seem easier and more time-efficient to deliver this information through statements, particularly when it is important to keep children's attention. For example, it may seem more efficient to say, "A zoo is a place where very special animals live so that we can go and learn

> *"Teachers should encourage children to use complete sentences and model complete sentences in their own talk."*

about them" than to ask, "Friends, use your words to tell our class about what a zoo is." However, by removing the open-ended prompt, the teacher loses a wonderful opportunity to engage children, learn about their prior knowledge, and allow them to practice using oral language.

Suggested Solution

Teachers should consider how to communicate information both by telling children things and by asking them to share their prior knowledge and opinions. To ensure that at least a few questions are posed during large-group time, plan open-ended questions and prompts ahead of time. Keep in mind that each open-ended prompt may invite two or more follow-up questions.

However, teachers should not treat their preplanned prompts as a script. Instead, they should listen carefully to children's responses and provide feedback that directly relates to those comments, even if it means exchanging a preplanned follow-up prompt for one that more directly responds to a child's remark. Remember, too, that large-group times are not the only times for posing questions; small group times are excellent as well and may relieve some of the pressure on teachers to keep things moving to maintain all children's focus. Lead and aide teachers can work together to plan open-ended questions for small-group times to ensure that all children are getting individualized attention and being asked open-ended prompts throughout the day.

Challenge No. 2: Children's Struggles to Respond

Some children may struggle to answer open-ended prompts, especially those who know less language. These children might include those who have language delays or other special needs, or typically developing children who come from particularly underserved backgrounds and are in need of additional exposure to the language of the classroom setting. In addition, a growing number of children in American schools are learning English as a second language, and it will take these children considerable time—generally several years—to begin to master English.

Suggested Solution

Although wait time might certainly help, all of these groups of children may benefit from some special support as they learn to respond to open-ended prompts. One strategy is to pose prompts to children most often in small-group settings. This allows teachers to meet these children where they are and provide useful scaffolds.

For example, for a child who knows few words, the teacher could pose the question and then model answering the question for this child. For example, the teacher could show a picture or prop and prompt, "Tell me about this butterfly!" If the child is not able to respond, the teacher could say, pointing to the picture or prop as a support, "This butterfly has large wings on its body to help it fly through the air."

If the child is able to say a few words, for example, responding "Butterfly!" the teacher could follow up by recognizing that idea and expanding on it, stating, "You're right, that's a butterfly! They fly through the air using these wings, and they use these antennae to help them know what's happening around them."

Over time, and with structured practice (including open-ended prompts), children with low levels of language will build English vocabulary and conceptual knowledge.

Integrating Open-Ended Prompts Throughout the Classroom Day

Open-ended prompts can and should be a part of all segments of the classroom day. However, teachers often find that certain parts of the day work better for certain kinds of exchanges. For example, the morning greeting time is a good opportunity for informal, one-on-one conversations.

Large-group experiences, such as circle time and book reading, offer the chance to ask more formal questions of all children and take multiple different answers. Center and small-group time allow for interactions between the teacher and one or just a few children. Group-sharing times allow children the chance to ask each other questions (although with young children, teachers often need to scaffold these interactions over several weeks or months). In the Table, we map out some suggestions for using questions throughout the day, but it is important that teachers remember how valuable it is to include questions in every part of the classroom, not just those included in the Table.

Conclusion

In summary, the field of early language and literacy has promoted the use of open-ended prompts as an effective way to develop language and vocabulary

"Center and small-group time allow for interactions between the teacher and one or just a few children."

skills in young children. However, teachers often ask open-ended prompts without allowing children to respond using the language and vocabulary that the teacher is trying to develop. Also, teachers frequently ask open-ended prompts but allow children to provide only a very short response before moving onto the next question or task. This minimizes feedback to children's responses that would help scaffold children's language learning.

As a result, children's use of language in classrooms is very limited and does not provide the opportunity to expand their ideas in more rich, elaborated ways. The guidance presented in this article helps teachers to understand the importance of extending conversations and providing feedback to create language-rich experiences for children, as well as some key ways to realize these goals.

TAKE ACTION!

1. Initially, prepare some open-ended prompts to bring to class to ask the children. These prompts can be tied to the books you are reading or the major concepts that you are developing in the classroom.

2. When you use the prompts, be mindful of asking each one and then waiting for the child's response.

3. After the child responds, follow up with meaningful feedback that encourages the child to provide more detail on or explanation of his/her comments.

4. Be patient when starting to use more open-ended prompts, because children need to learn that you are scaffolding their language and want them to talk more.

5. As children build experience with these conversation-building prompts, they will volunteer more and increasingly complex language, and conversations will become a more prominent part of your classroom experience.
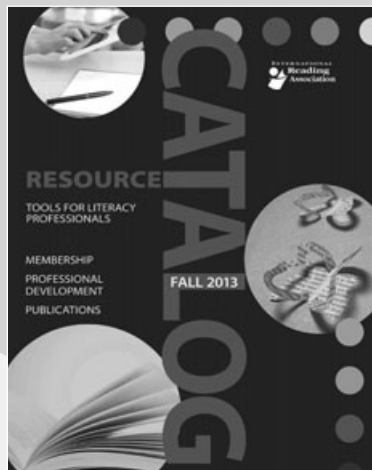
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