



Preparing Preschoolers for “School Talk”

By Lauren Lowry

Hanen Certified SLP and Clinical Staff Writer

Being prepared for school involves a lot more than going to the store to buy a lunchbox and a backpack. There are many skills that children need to be able to function in a classroom and understand the curriculum. Children learn many of these skills at home as they interact with their parents and siblings. For example, they learn to express themselves well, understand directions, follow daily routines, listen to and tell stories, have conversations, and use their imagination.

But success at school also depends on being able to understand and use “school talk”, a special type of talk that is used in the classroom. Also known as “academic talk” and “classroom discourse” [1], school talk is quite different from the type of language children hear during everyday life at home, which is known as “casual talk”.

Differences Between School Talk and Casual Talk

The differences between “school talk” and “casual talk” are reflected in why, how, and what we talk about [1,2]:

- **Why we talk**
 - Casual talk helps us go about our daily tasks and maintain relationships. When someone asks a question at home, he or she usually doesn’t know the answer.
 - School talk is used to help children learn new things. When the teacher asks a question, he or she usually knows the answer, and is asking the question to test the children.

- **How we talk**
 - Casual talk is informal and makes use of simple words, shorter sentences, and straightforward grammar. People tend to take turns talking during conversations.

When individuals tell stories, they don't involve complex thinking and ideas are loosely linked together.

- School talk is more formal and involves many unfamiliar words, longer sentences, and more complicated grammar. Words that describe mental states are used, such as “think”, “wonder”, and “know”. The teacher tends to do most of the talking, and the children are expected to listen unless the teacher calls upon them. When teachers and children tell stories, they are expected to be logically organized and easy to follow.
- **What we talk about**
 - The topics in casual talk usually centre around people, objects, events and opinions which are personally relevant to the individuals having the conversation
 - The concepts discussed in school talk are more precise, and the topics are general in nature and accepted by the wider, educated public. For example, a general (school talk) topic would be bears, their habitat and food sources, whereas a personally relevant topic in casual talk would be a bear that a child saw at the zoo [2].

How Teachers Can Help Children Learn about School Talk

The first step is to identify which children are at risk for difficulties with school talk. A speech-language pathologist can be consulted to help identify and assess these children.

In order to help children understand and use school talk, teachers can:

- **Make school talk explicit**

One important way to promote school talk is to make it explicit by explaining the school talk expectations required before engaging in an activity. For example, a teacher might highlight the way she will ask questions that test the children's knowledge by saying “Because we are in school, I'm going to ask you some questions I already know the answer to. This helps me know if I'm doing a good job teaching you. If you don't know the answer, that's okay. Maybe someone else will know the answer.” Teachers can also explain how children can make an educated guess when they are unsure of an answer, saying something like, “Sometimes you might not know the answer, but you can think about what the answer might be and let us know what you are thinking.” [1, p. 34]

- **Use “think alouds”**

“Think alouds” involve putting one's thought process into words. Teachers can use think alouds to demonstrate the thought process involved in some aspects of school talk. For example, a think aloud which demonstrates how to think of an answer to a question might be: “I wonder who this book is going to be about? I am going to use the front cover to look for hints to guess who it's about...” [1, p. 34]. Teachers can also use think alouds to explain how to make a guess, such as, “There's a picture of a bear and a bird on the cover, so maybe the book is about one of those animals.”

- **Use meaningful activities**

It's easiest to teach children about school talk while they are engaged in a meaningful activity during which school talk is used, such as Show and Tell and book sharing:

- **Show and Tell**

Show and Tell involves the child discussing personal experiences with the class via an explanation that is often guided by the teacher through comments and questions. In this way, the teacher guides the child's casual talk about his or her personally relevant item towards talk that is closer to school talk. Before starting Show and Tell, the teacher can clearly describe the expectations to the children, saying something like "When you talk about your special rock in school, you may quickly tell us why it is special to you, but then we also want to talk together about what kind of rock it is...That way, we can use your special rock to learn about lots of rocks. I'll help you by asking you some questions as you tell us about your special rock" [1, p.33].

- **Book sharing**

Sharing books in preschool offers a good opportunity to model some of the more complex language and thinking required in school talk. Teachers can use and explain new, unfamiliar vocabulary, ask questions and make comments that help the children make connections between the story and their own experiences, and help children think beyond the pages of the book.

Strategies for promoting the type of vocabulary and conversations found in school talk are the focus of *ABC and Beyond™* [3]. Educators learn how to highlight more complex vocabulary and connect these new words to the children's own experiences. They also learn to use questions, comments and think alouds during book sharing to help children think more deeply about the story. By providing explanations, talking about problems in the story, predicting what might happen, and connecting the story to the child's own personal experiences, educators expose children to the language needed for school talk.

How Parents Can Help Their Child Learn About School Talk

Parents should not abandon their casual talk at home with their children! But they can prepare their child for school talk by incorporating some language that is similar to that used in the classroom. Parents can use daily activities like making cookies, doing a craft, or sharing books to model:

- **New words** – Think about words that your child doesn't already know when you do an activity together. While baking, you can talk about *temperature*, *dough*, or *whisk*. When playing with Lego, you can talk about *structures*, *skyscrapers*, or *height*. And books provide endless opportunities to introduce new words.
- **Explanations and descriptions** – If your child is curious about something new, how it works, or what it does, offer an explanation or a description of the process. For example, if you are reading a book about a spider and your child is curious about its web, you can explain that the spider uses its web to catch bugs to eat, or offer a description like "the web is made out of sticky threads".

- **Think alouds** – Put your own thought process into words. For example, when doing a craft together, talk about your decision-making process by saying “I wonder what it would look like if I glued some popsicle sticks on the side. Hmm...maybe it would be too heavy and fall over”. This is the type of thought process children need to engage in at school, and they are sometimes expected to describe their thought process to their teacher.
- **Questions and comments that expand your child’s thinking** – Children need to infer, reason, and think beyond the here-and-now during classroom discussions. You can make comments and ask questions during conversations at home with your child that will promote this type of thinking. For example, when reading *Good Night, Gorilla* [4], you might ask a question about the zookeeper, who hasn’t noticed the gorilla has stolen his keys, such as “What do you think the zookeeper will do when he notices his keys are missing?” Or you might make a comment about the zookeeper’s wife who is sleeping and doesn’t know that the zoo animals are sleeping in her bedroom, such as, “I think she is going to be shocked when she wakes up!” In this way, you can help your child think beyond the story, about what might happen next, how the characters feel, and why things happen in the story.

Our Hanen resource *I’m Ready™* [5] provides parents with strategies for modelling this type of language during books and daily life with their child. The strategies presented in *I’m Ready™* are aimed at building children’s early literacy skills, but they also provide children with exposure to school talk.

References

1. van Kleeck, A. & Schwarz, A. L. (2011). Making “academic talk” explicit: Research directions for fostering classroom discourse skills in children from nonmainstream cultures. *Revue Suisse des Sciences de l’Éducation*, 33(1), 29-46.
2. van Kleeck, A. (2014). Distinguishing between casual talk and academic talk beginning in the preschool years: An important consideration for speech-language pathologists. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 23, 724-741.
3. Weitzman, E. & Greenberg, J. (2010). *ABC and Beyond™: Building Emergent Literacy in Early Childhood Settings*. Toronto, ON: The Hanen Centre.
4. Rathmann, P. (200). *Good Night, Gorilla*. Puffin Books: London.
5. Greenberg, J. & Weitzman, E. (2014). *I’m Ready!™: How to prepare your child for reading success*. Toronto, ON: The Hanen Centre.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

For more information, please visit www.hanen.org.

The Hanen Centre is a Registered Charitable Organization (#11895 2357 RR0001)