

Courtesy of Cathleen S. Soundy



## Fostering the Emotional and Language Needs of Young Learners

Cathleen S. Soundy and  
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A Head Start class returns from lunch and an outdoor walk to a classroom prepared for naptime. Each child goes directly to a cot, removes his or her shoes, and reclines with a small stuffed animal. The teacher turns off the lights and lowers the window shades. Hushed voices, muffled laughter, and the rustle of wiggly arms and legs rubbing against cots are heard.

Within moments the teacher is seated on the floor, gazing into the eyes of a child. She asks softly, “What would you like to talk about today?” The teacher listens intently as the child shares a special moment—a story, an observation, whatever. She asks questions to encourage a conversational exchange.

Nearby children listen and wait eagerly, but patiently, for their turn. They know their trustworthy “pillow partner” will get to them. Within 15 minutes or so, all of the children have had an opportunity to share a special one-on-one dialogue with their teacher. A quick glance around the room reveals a few children still settling down, but most are already asleep—stuffed animals nestled in their arms. The teacher peers over the classroom of children at rest; a sense of peacefulness fills the room.

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**E**arly childhood teachers are trained to foster language development by planning opportunities for children to talk about relevant experiences (Galda, Cullinan, & Strickland 1993). But they are less knowledgeable about talk as a means to spin the “web of human relations” in the classroom (Britton 1970). Today’s youngsters need teachers who are eager to see that the essentials of healthy emotional development are met (Raver & Zigler 1997). Quality interaction means meeting children where they are with respect to emotions and language.

### Talk—The core of education

Effective teacher interaction with children has a major impact on quality in early childhood programs. NAEYC’s guidelines for developmentally appropriate practice (Bredekamp & Copple 1997) contain much detail regarding teachers’ classroom interactions. How teachers talk to individual children is at the very core of early childhood education.

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Adult-child relationships in early childhood programs are important to children’s security, self-confidence, and learning (Elicker & Fortner-Wood 1995). However, many early childhood classrooms do not promote a stimulating and experiential language

learning atmosphere. Numerous studies document the low frequency of one-on-one interactions between young children and their teachers (Kontos & Wilcox-Herzog 1997). Data from the national Life in Preschool study conducted in Head Start, child care, and preschool classrooms (Layzer, Goodson, & Moss 1993) show that nearly one-third (31%) of the children received no individual attention during an extensive observation period. Given that language is the foundation for all academic and social skills, as well as the basis for establishing strong relationships, such findings signal a roadblock to successful language and literacy learning, especially for children with minimal language competence.

Talk is a major instrument of learning, a natural activity that underlies and supports literacy development. As Britton notes, "Speech certainly has an important role to play in acquisition of mastery of the written language" (1983, 14). Writing flows from that talk. The talk of young

children is the direct precursor of their later thinking (Britton 1970). The number of language experiences children have is an important factor in their literacy development (Allington 1994; Cambridge 1995).

The quality of language experiences is also important. Brody, Stone-man, and McCoy (1994) identified teachers' social interaction patterns most likely to have supported

the emerging literacy skills of kindergartners who had attended Head Start. Two of their most substantial findings directly address quality. The teachers who advanced literacy were more likely to demonstrate higher responsiveness to a child's questions and to interact affectionately during storytelling. Clearly, young learner/talkers need both time and opportunity to use their developing language skills with trained teachers who engage, encourage, and verbally communicate with them.

The forms of oral language, especially formal "school-like" language and metalinguistic awareness, that children produce are important for subsequent performance on school-based measures of reading and writing. Moreover, children who are proficient in oral language tend to be higher achievers on measures of vocabulary and other aspects of language and literacy development (Wells 1986; Morrow 1993). The early preschool years must be devoted to affectionate literacy interactions in

which children are engaged in, animated by, and cognitively challenged with language.

## **A case for Pillow Talk**

An increasing number of teachers create classrooms in which meaningful talk and relationship building can take place. Many use the morning arrival time to welcome each child and to engage in personalized conversations. Distractions are frequent, however, and teachers' good intentions are often plagued by the need to carry out other responsibilities (such as conferring with other adults, checking on snacks, or preparing an activity). Children too are less focused at this time; family good-byes often trigger separation anxieties and other children may beckon their newly arriving playmates. During indoor or outdoor choice times, teachers tend to socialize with small groups, encourage play activities, and manage behavior rather than interact with individual children. And even though teachers talk with children throughout the day, they talk with individual children relatively infrequently and on an irregular basis.

Pillow Talk is a more relaxed and natural way to converse informally with each child. The constant din and hubbub of classroom life is set aside for a time of stillness. Busy teachers can pause and talk exclusively with a child about some of the many things she's doing, thinking, and feeling. With so much stress and instability in the lives of some families today, children can feel very little, if any, inner calm. Frightening scenes on TV, giving little or no reassurance for children who are watching, may detract from a child's sense of self-worth.

Pillow Talk is a ritual that can anchor the day for children. Regular and predictable one-on-one talks with a teacher give a child a sense of security. They also offer everyone a chance to discuss issues that might never get talked about otherwise and allow children to bring out and express their private "inner songs."

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### Scenes from Nancy's Head Start classroom

Nancy, a Head Start teacher in Philadelphia, has experimented with Pillow Talk for several years. Influenced by the work of child psychiatrist Stanley Greenspan (1997) and decades of work with young children, she is a firm believer in supporting children's emotional development and oral language learning. Her idea for Pillow Talk germinated after reading an article describing Greenspan's "floortime," a one-to-one interaction technique that involves the adult observing children's behaviors and unspoken messages, interacting with appropriate words and gestures, and encouraging children to take the lead in their own verbal discoveries.

As Nancy began to reflect on her interaction practices, she quickly took inventory of the conditions that enable oral language learning. Although talk was prevalent in her classroom, it was difficult for Nancy to confirm whether every child had a daily opportunity for that special one-on-one attention. Furthermore, when she tried to envision whether she was really tuning in to children's individual needs, she began to question the degree of respect she held for the child's style, rhythm, and moods that Greenspan writes about. She wanted to find a better way of making sure every child knew that she cared about him and valued what he had to say.

Nancy tried to think of a time during the day when each child could have her undivided attention and be able to talk openly about anything. The beginning of naptime seemed logical. Having Pillow Talk at each child's cot could ensure one-on-one interaction with every child each day. But the impact of such an activity on naptime was unknown. Nancy felt a trial period was needed before the approach could be shared with other Head Start personnel. She worked to perfect the method—her goal was to model warmth, empathy, and openness to what each child wanted to say.

Once children are settled on their cots, Nancy sits on the floor next to a child. Her prompt, "Do you have anything you want to talk about today?" initiates the conversation. Most children are eager to share a personal statement about themselves or their families, describe

an event that happened at home or school, or ask the teacher to do something. Children tend to notice and to be interested in all that surrounds them. Two-way communication is easily established.

Nancy closes the conversation with a warm and affectionate gesture, such as a light pat on the shoulder. The final step in the routine is to tell the child that it is time to be very quiet and take her nap, accompanied with the message, "I'll see you when you wake up." On occasion, when a child declines to talk, Nancy whispers okay and says, "I'll see you when you wake up," then gives a gentle touch.

### Teacher-child behavior during Pillow Talk

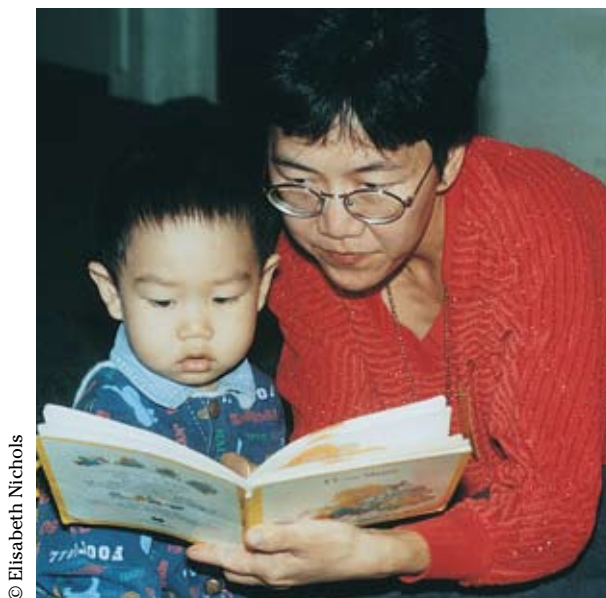
While using this approach over the years, Nancy has gained numerous insights about children's language

and emotions and the degree of control that the learners have over them. For example, sometimes a child indicates a desire to talk but hesitates as if trying to think of something. Nancy asks what he did that morning or poses another question to get him started. When the child finishes talking about an activity or answering a question, Nancy cycles back and asks, "Is there anything else you want to talk about?" At this point the child often will initiate his own conversation. The actual process of talking seems to stimulate thought processes that trigger latent ideas.

Sometimes children who are shy seem to have little to say

even when they indicate a desire to talk. They struggle to get out one sentence, such as "I got a new kitten." In these cases Nancy asks questions to help them find words to express their messages.

When a child has finished talking, Nancy sometimes takes a moment to discuss an incident or a situation that occurred earlier in the day. For example, the child may have forgotten to honor a class rule; she may have hit someone, yelled unkind words, or refused to cooperate. With the passing of time the child is not as emotionally involved in the incident and is better able to talk about her behavior, offer a solution, and discuss any lingering feelings. The process empowers the child to resolve inner conflict and helps her to modulate



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her feelings and behaviors within the context of desirable peer interaction.

Some children use Pillow Talk to complain about another child or to tell about something they don't like. This is an opening for a problem-solving discussion—a chance to help young children learn how to navigate more successfully

their emerging social worlds.

Sometimes Nancy learns how personal experiences affect children's feelings and behaviors. For example, one day the class was on the rooftop playground at school. Several children noticed smoke billowing out of a house and heard fire trucks racing by the school. One girl started screaming and crying and saying that she did not like fire. Later that day during Pillow Talk the girl told Nancy about a fire her family had in their apartment, how she and her mom and sister rushed to get out, and how scared she was. Nancy then understood her sense of panic; she was able to offer the child an opportunity to talk about her fears.

Some children may tell the same stories for several days. Four- and five-year-olds seem to never tire of talking about events they are interested in. For instance, every day for almost two weeks, one child told Nancy something about her trip to Disney World. When Nancy asked if there was anything else she wanted to talk about, the girl would simply add another detail about her trip. Another girl received a Barbie dollhouse for Christmas. Afterward she often talked about the dollhouse or some other Barbie item that she played with.

Sometimes Nancy discovers interesting talents or things that fascinate a child. One child often shared her dreams and had a knack for telling stories. Nancy was not sure if the child's dreams or imagination were working, but she let the girl dictate the dreams to her, and later the child drew pictures to accompany her story dreams.

Many times children are eager to discuss classroom activities. Their comments can reveal details about their play that typically bypass teacher's awareness. The following teacher-child conversation depicts the type of new learnings that can result.

**Teacher:** Mr. Tyree, how are you today?

**Child:** Fine.

**Teacher:** You said you needed to talk to me about something. What do you want to talk about today?

**Child:** Ummm . . .

**Teacher:** Can you tell me about something you did today that you liked?

**Child:** Making stuff.

**Teacher:** What kind of stuff?

**Child:** Cologne.

**Teacher:** Cologne! Hmm . . . [surprised tone] How did it smell?

**Child:** Good!

**Teacher:** Making cologne! Mmm . . . You didn't tell me that was what you were doing. I saw you playing with all those little bottles. Was that what you were making at the water table?

**Child:** Yes.

**Teacher:** Did you make anything else?

**Child:** No.

**Teacher:** Just cologne.

**Child:** Tomorrow come and smell.

**Teacher:** Okay, I will. Tell me, what did we have to do when you boys finished playing there?

**Child:** Clean up.

**Teacher:** Yes, we had to get Ms. Annette's mop. I'm glad you had fun. Okay, it's time to be very quiet and take your nap. I'll see you when you wake up.

## Positive results

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The first year of Pillow Talk, Nancy had one child who asked every day at lunchtime if she was going to talk to him at naptime. Even if she asked him if he wanted to tell anything then, the child would say, "No, I'll wait until Talk Time. I just wanted to make sure you were going to have Talk Time today."

During the first week of school the district's Head Start schedule usually consists of five half-day sessions to help children transition to their new classrooms. On the first day of school a returning five-year-old asked Nancy if he could help get out the cots. Nancy reminded him that the children were not napping because it was a half day. The boy admitted he really didn't want to take a nap—he just wanted to do "that talk stuff."

On occasion, Nancy sits in a rocking chair and invites the children to come one by one to her. If a child expresses a preference for Nancy to come to the cot, she honors the request. Almost every child chooses the rocker and the opportunity to sit on Nancy's lap. This approach requires more time than walking around to their cots, but most children view the opportunity as special and are eager for a turn. A word of caution here, though: before the teacher has a talk session with each child, some children will have already fallen asleep.

After a few weeks, teachers have a good idea of which children fall asleep quickly, and those youngsters can be accommodated first.

Nancy admits that she sometimes has things to do or she is tired and doesn't feel like going around to the cots. But she realizes how important Pillow Talk is for the children and she knows they are going to be disappointed or question her about not doing Talk Time. She usually thoroughly enjoys Pillow Talk. In her words, "I don't have to plan or write objectives or prepare materials—it has become a special time of the day for me. I get a chance to relax, to let the children talk, to give a hug, and to feel special myself." Such statements emphasize the mutual benefit for the teacher and children and remind us all of the many beautiful images that can emerge from conversations with children.

### Conclusion

High-quality early childhood programs are characterized by meaningful, two-way interactions between children and adults. Early childhood educators need to provide experiences that promote positive teacher-child interactions. Teachers who are effective communicators are conscious of how they distribute our attention across children. They ensure ample opportunities for talk with individual children.

Teachers can easily adopt the Pillow Talk strategy described in this article. This approach promotes language experiences that are a natural part of meaningful conversations. Pillow Talk acknowledges the importance of creating opportunities for developmentally appropriate emotional and intellectual interactions and requires teachers to allow each child to determine the direction of the conversation. The teacher's primary role is simply to tune in to the child's words and behaviors. When first using Pillow Talk, the exchanges between teacher and child might consist of simple, warm exchanges. Over time, they can expand to talk about daily events and children's feelings. The precise words teachers use are secondary to being physically close, attentive, and ready to listen. Typically, Pillow Talk conversations last only a few minutes. Over time children gain a sense of being loved, secure, and understood. Some children

carry on rich dialogues, others speak little, but all will at some point communicate through smiles and other facial expressions, sounds, and gestures.

The challenge for teachers is to create rewarding conversations, "a meeting of the minds," in which children realize that communicating with adults is interesting. Teachers come to recognize the value of building warm relationships by continuing the dialogue and acknowledging children's personal interests and experiences. Pillow Talk provides effective communication and rich language-learning experiences.

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