

### Further reading

Hall, N. and Abbott, L., *Play in the Primary Curriculum*, Hodder and Stoughton, 1991.

Hutt, S.J. and others, *Play Exploration and Learning*, Routledge, 1989.

Tizard, B. and Hughes, M., *Young Children Learning*, Fontana, 1984.

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## Using role-play to improve nursery children's language

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### AIM

*To find the best ways of using role-play to improve nursery children's language.*

### SUMMARY OF FINDINGS FOR THIS CASE STUDY

- ★ Setting up a role-play area did not in itself produce good language development. The involvement of adults from other settings and the planned use of dramatic incidents were needed to reveal the full linguistic capacities of Early Years pupils.
- ★ Children's language was usually strongest when they were able to initiate conversations rather than simply answering questions.
- ★ Talk was poorest when children were simply asked a series of questions, even if these were open questions.
- ★ Teachers' planning should build in stimulating events and opportunities for pupils to make extended contributions by relating closely to their school experiences.

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## Aims and background

The project took account of research that indicates children's homes are in some ways more effective than schools in stimulating and enriching their language. Children's use of language was tape-recorded over six weeks in which different interventions in children's play were developed.

At the beginning of the project parents were asked to complete a questionnaire about pupils' ability and involvement in conversation within the home. Forty per cent of those responding noted that their children were confident in their conversation at home, in contrast to the teachers' experience in the nursery.

Tizard and Hughes (1984) suggest that nursery schools' emphasis on play may exclude a child's opportunity to learn from contact with the adult world. In undertaking the study, we considered Hall's work (1991) which researched role play relevant to the children's environment as a means of bridging this gap and providing a vehicle for learning in the classroom. This was used as a basis for developing a series of activities over a six-week period linked to shop play in the classroom. Within the activities developed we aimed to include those factors which Tizard and Hughes suggest contribute to a good learning environment, with adult roles and interventions. Two factors in particular were concentrated on: shared experiences of events; and activities similar to children's experiences outside the

school. The language during the play was recorded at intervals over the six weeks using tape recorders and a video camera and analysed according to categories of children's speech derived from the recording. The categories included statements, explanation and elaboration, requests, questions and minimal response.

*“Children's language was usually strongest when they were able to take a full part in conversations.”*

## Explanation of findings

Setting up a role-play area did not in itself produce good language development. Most children, most of the time, played together in classrooms with little indication that they are developing their speech. In the following example, it was not possible to determine how many children were involved:

“Hello.”  
 “What are they?”  
 “Here you are.”  
 “Do you sell crisps?”  
 “What do you want?”  
 “I want some.”  
 “Any more baskets, please.”  
 “She has to put them in.”  
 “She's mum.”  
 “Got her money.”  
 “50p.”  
 “My money's at home.”  
 “50p please.”  
 “I got some money.”  
 “Me have that.”

Children's language was usually strongest when they were able to initiate conversations – for example, when they told the listeners something they did not already know, when they talked about something that had excited them or which challenged them to provide descriptions and explanations, and when they initiated contributions. The most effective intervention in improving the children's language in this project was the staging of a burglary in a nursery play shop, which involved both a real policeman and a shop assistant.

“They're phoning the police.”  
 “Look. Look at this.”  
 “Who did it? A bad mister?”  
 “Nooooooo.”  
 “He did. A bad mister did it.”  
 “Calling police up.”  
 “It's all broken.”  
 “Can you play with us?”  
 “Jodie, have you seen that?”  
 “Have you seen shop?”  
 “It's all messed up.”  
 “And the butter's gone.”

*“Talk was poorest when children were simply asked a series of questions.”*

One child had been absent, and this provided an opportunity to put the children in charge and allow them to explain what had happened. Despite problems in, for example, understanding the children's thinking about the number of burglars involved, it is clear that the overall pattern of language is more elaborate, extensive and enquiring.

“It was a tip.”  
 “It was a tip.”  
 “All food were off t'shelves.”  
 “All were off t'shelves.”  
 “They'd left some money; they'd broken the till.”  
 Teacher: “We phoned the policeman. What did we tell him?”  
 “Yeh, a burglar came and a bad man should have done it. “

“Came through t' window.”  
 “I think there were 10.”  
 Teacher: “Maegan thought there were 10.”  
 “And we got nowt left in.”  
 “ I think there were 10.  
 Anyway, do you know why I said 10? Coz, coz they didn't, coz they, coz they, coz, you know why? Coz, coz they can't. Coz they can't at once. Coz one can't carry at once.”

Talk was poorest when children were simply asked a series of questions, especially when these were unplanned and related to routine events.

This can be illustrated by a typical teacher-pupil intervention showing how questioning can hinder rather than encourage language. In this extract, the shop is being set up, but is empty, and has an “open soon” sign.

*“Teachers' planning should build in stimulating events and opportunities so that pupils can make extended contributions, follow lines of thought, and initiate discussion.”*

Child: “Is it open?”  
 Teacher: “Well, I don't know, you see. We're going to have a look at a shop to see what's inside. Some of the things are there, but we're going to a real shop. What does the sign say? [Reading] Due to open soon. Soon doesn't mean today; it means another day.”  
 “Tomorrow?”  
 “Yes, but we're gonna play in it when we get it ready, but first we gonna find out what we need in the shop. What sort of things do you need [pupils point at bag of packets for the shop]. Tell me what there is. What do you need?” [Pupils continue to point.]  
 “I need...”  
 “If you don't know what they are, you won't be able to buy them, will you? What is it?”  
 “Gravy.”

Teachers' planning should build in stimulating events and opportunities, especially contact with adults in familiar, out-of-school roles, so that pupils can make extended contributions, follow lines of thought, and initiate discussion. The following table, based on an analysis of the tapes, shows the effect of the planned intervention on the children's speech, as compared with their talk about routine use of the shop for role play.

**Effects of intervention on children's speech**

	Statements	Explain/elaborate	Requests	Question	Minimal response
Talking about the shop	20	16	6	9	49
The burglary	53	19	7	6	15
The day after the burglary	66	21	0	6	7