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# CAR TALKS: STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE PARENT AND CHILD COMMUNICATION

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Gina Berridge, Stacey Kewon, and Jill Raisor

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Young children learn about their social and cultural world through experiences with language, drawing, and writing. Parents and families obviously play an important role in the development of children's understanding of their world as they are a child's first teacher. Bronfenbrenner (1979) states "Powerful forces affect the child's behavior and development not directly but through their impact of the immediate settings containing the child, especially his family" (p. 15). According to Vygotsky (1978) interaction between children and their parents during cognitive literacy tasks is essential for children's learning and socialization. Doyle and Bramwell (2006) state that for maximum student achievement to occur in school, there needs to be a partnership with parents and families. "Teachers are, however, often challenged to find the means and time to establish and maintain this positive connection with families" (p. 562). *Car Talks* are an easy way teachers can communicate the essential learning of the day to parents so conversation with their children can be rich

and meaningful in the car going home or during any time where there is an opportunity to engage in dialogue. Research supports the use of naturalistic approaches to promoting language development of young children (Piaget & Galant, 1996). The strengths of this type of natural learning have been effective with wide ranges of linguistic acquisitions including labeling, use of adjectives and complex sentences (Owens, 1999; Warren & Kaiser 1986).

## **Literature Review**

Research shows that children who have foundational literacy skills like oral language skills are more likely to succeed throughout their K-12 years (Hart & Risley, 1999; Hanson & Farrell, 1995). Literacy skills including listening, speaking, writing, and reading are affected by a child's home environment and interaction with parents and family at a young age (Irish, 2016). Early reading problems are complex but variables including little exposure to language and ideas at home (St. Pierre & Lavzer, 1998). It has been shown that children who have good

oral language skills are better equipped to learn how to read and write than children who do not have these skills (Lonigan, 2016). Vocabulary is naturally acquired in the home and occurs naturally through dialogue with family (Hart & Risely, 1995). So, literacy development begins at home with parents, siblings, and extended family long before it is formally addressed in school and these factors are directly linked to a student's success in school (Halsey, 2008). Parents who take with their young children greatly increase their language skills (Lawrence & Snow, 2011) and when centered on an activity or topic it is crucial to their literacy development (Ninio & Snow, 1996).

Fletcher, Cross, Tanney, Schneider and Finch (2008) reported in their study that vocabulary development in the early years comes through dialogue with parents and families. Nagy and Herman (1987) found that school children's vocabulary increases by about 2000 words per year, however, Biemiller and Slonin (2001) believed that most of this growth comes from incidental learning. This signifies that new vocabulary does not solely come from a list of words a child learns in school but from language they hear and read at home, at soccer practice, at the grocery store, at school, and during times commuting in the car.

### **Collaboration Between Teachers and Parents**

According to McAllister, Wilson, Green and Baldwin (2005) research studies indicate that a lack of partnership or collaboration between teachers and parents can have a

negative effect on young children's success in school. It is important that teachers effectively partner with parents to ensure a child's success in school and life. It is also important for children to generalize what they are learning in school to other settings like home or talking with a parent for increased understanding (Halsey, 2008). However, there are limited models on how parents and teachers can collaborate to ensure academic success (White, 2015). Deming (2009) stated that the earlier parents and teachers can collaborate and partner in learning experiences for children, the greater the chance that the child will be a successful. But, if parent-led instruction is tedious and/or time consuming, parents may not utilize it even if it is somewhat successful. So, it is important for parents to embed instruction within daily routines incidentally and that they be integrated into a parent's already busy schedule (Halsey, 2008). She goes on to report that "naturalistic, embedded approaches can be thought of as minimally invasive to parent-child routines because they utilize occurring activities as teaching opportunities" (p. 15). The following paragraphs detail examples of models for communication between parents and children during daily activities such as the time spent in a car commuting hence the title *Car Talks*.

### **Car Talks**

Upon entering an older preschool classroom, there was a noticeable sign titled *Car Talk*.



Figure 1. Car Talk Sign in Classroom.

Below the sign was a hand-written note from the teacher. It stated,

***“Homes - Houses”***

*A rabbit lives in a warren.*

*A bear hibernates in a den.*

*No matter where or what your home is...  
it should provide shelter.*

*Tonight, when you drive in your  
driveway, stop and look at your house.*

*Discuss with your child how many windows  
there are, where the doors are located, the  
shape of the house, the color of the house,  
and anything else unique about your house.*

*We are going to draw our houses next week.*

*We may even learn our house number and  
street name. We will continue to compare our  
houses to different animal houses. We will  
also look at homes in other countries and  
how they are different.*

*House – A building for human habitation.*

*Shelter – Something that covers or  
affords protection.*

*Car Talks* is a communication strategy from the teacher to parents informing them of the day’s conversations at school. Within the

brief paragraph, ideas for connecting school content to home life are embedded. The above example served a multitude of purposes. First, it can align with multiple Indiana Early Learning Foundations for older preschool aged children. Refer to Table 1 to see the Indiana Foundations correlated to the above example of a *Car Talk*.

Table 1		
Correlation to Indiana Foundations		
Foundation	Topic	Indicator(s)
English/ Language Arts	ELA1.1: Demonstrate receptive communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrate continual growth in understanding increasingly complex and varied vocabulary</li> </ul>
	ELA1.2: Demonstrate expressive communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Demonstrate continual growth in increasingly varied and complex vocabulary</li> <li>Use complex sentences</li> <li>Describe activities, experiences and stories with expanded detail</li> </ul>
	ELA1.3: Demonstrate ability to engage in conversations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Answer questions posed by adults or peers</li> <li>Ask questions for understanding and clarity</li> <li>Make comment on topic</li> <li>Stay on topic in two-way conversation that involves multiple turns</li> </ul>
	ELA2.4: Demonstrate comprehension	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Respond and interact with stories</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Answer questions about a story</li> </ul>
Mathematics	M1.1: Demonstrate strong sense of counting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recognize the last number name said tells the number of objects counted</li> </ul>
	M1.2: Demonstrate understanding of written numerals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Name written numerals from 0-10</li> </ul>
Approaches to Play and Learning	APL1.1: Demonstrate initiative and self-direction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Take initiative to learn new concepts and try new experiences</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Seek and gather new information to plan for projects and activities</li> </ul>
	APL1.2: Demonstrate interest and curiosity as a learner	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate eagerness to learn about and discuss new topics, ideas, and tasks</li> </ul>
		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use a variety of learning approaches, such as observing, imitating, asking questions, hands-on investigation, and active exploration</li> </ul>
Science	SC3.1: Demonstrate awareness of life	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ask questions and conduct investigations to understand life science</li> </ul>
Social Studies	SS3.2: Demonstrate awareness of places and regions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Become familiar with information about where they live and understand what an address is</li> </ul>
	SS3.3: Demonstrate awareness of environment and society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Begin to describe the reciprocal relationship between humans and the environment</li> </ul>
Creative Arts	CA3.1 Demonstrate creative expression through the visual art process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and use colors, lines, and shapes found in the environment</li> </ul>

		and in works of art
	CA3.2: Demonstrate creative expression through visual art production	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progress in ability to create drawings, models, and other art using a variety of materials</li> </ul>
Physical Health and Growth	PHG1.2: Demonstrate development of safety practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demonstrate basic safety knowledge</li> </ul>

Table 1

Second, it serves as a communication tool from the teacher to the families. Families are quickly provided an overview of the day's topic as well as examples of how to extend a conversation. Including animal homes, adding rich vocabulary, and posing questions can all engage various ages of learners. This communication can take the form that works best for your setting. Examples might include an electronic communication system, weekly newsletter, or a simple sign posted by the sign in/sign out area in the classroom.

Last, *Car Talks* encourage dialogue between family members. On a daily basis, valuable time is lost as we allow children to “zone out” to the mesmerizing glow of electronics. *Car Talks* provide real examples and starting discussion questions to extend a conversation beyond, Adult: “How was your day?” Child: “Good.” or Adult: What did you do at school today?” Child: “Nothing.” Assigning tasks such as to search for something at home generates excitement which then carries over into the home to hope of engaging other family members.

This particular communication strategy can and should change based on the content

studied in the classroom. It is also important to note that the teacher best knows the school community and families, so adapting strategies to work with your setting might be necessary. Detailed in this manuscript are various models for encouraging and prompting conversation between family members and a young child between the ages of approximately 2 and early elementary school age.

### **Communication Strategy Ideas for Teachers to Share with Families**

**Car talks - Community.** Children are naturally inquisitive about their surroundings. Teachers can encourage parents to feed that natural curiosity by asking children to compare and contrast buildings like schools, churches, grocery stores, hospitals, and banks and special vehicles like ambulances, school buses, fire trucks, and large construction equipment as you pass them on your commute. Create dialogue to help children understand these important vehicles and structures in their surroundings and why they are important. Give questions to parents to ask their child like:

- Who works in a bank?
- Who works in a hospital?
- How are a bank and grocery store alike?
- How is a fire truck like an ambulance?

**Car talks – Literacy.** Teachers can extend the read aloud by putting the title of the book they are reading on the *Car Talk* sign and encouraging parents to have students retell the story. Questions from parents such

as the following will help a student recall the read aloud:

- How did the story begin?
- What happened next?"
- What was the most exciting part of the story?
- How did the story end?
- Who was the story about?

Include vocabulary words from the story that may be new for children and have parents talk about these words and their meanings while driving. Another literacy strategy starts by simply creating a story line with blanks. The story can have content from a read aloud or learning that week or used to increase child’s creativity and language skills. Children will quickly catch on to the game. The best part is that this game can engage parents and siblings and requires nothing other than imagination! Have parents and children take turns filling in the blanks:

Oh dear! I forgot \_\_\_\_\_. And we needed \_\_\_\_\_ for the \_\_\_\_\_. I’ll run in the house and grab \_\_\_\_\_ so we can get going to the \_\_\_\_\_. I hope we are not \_\_\_\_\_. I can’t believe we saw \_\_\_\_\_! What a great \_\_\_\_\_.  
Soon, it was time to go \_\_\_\_\_. We got in the \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_ away.  
Another example could be:  
We are going to the \_\_\_\_\_ today. Don’t forget the \_\_\_\_\_. I hope it doesn’t \_\_\_\_\_. The best part was \_\_\_\_\_. I can’t wait until \_\_\_\_\_ to tell \_\_\_\_\_.

**Car talks – Music.** According to Salcedo (2002), using nonverbal ‘right-brain’

skills, such as actions, emotions, and music aids improvement of creativity, memory, and the ability to imitate, which is considered one of the most useful strategies in language learning. *Old MacDonald Had a Farm* is a classic children's song that is good for practicing animal sounds and phonemic awareness by isolating sounds in the words. For instance, you can have parents ask their children the following:

- What beginning sound do you hear in moo?
- What beginning sound do you hear in cluck?
- What ending sound do you hear in oink?
- What ending sound do you hear in ruff?

Another idea involving the song *Old MacDonald Had a Farm* is to pause when you suggest an animal on the farm. For example, Old MacDonald had a farm and on that farm, he had a \_\_\_\_\_. Encouraging the child to suggest various farm animals is fun, but a real challenge is to mix in non-farm animals such as a seal. After some giggles and finishing the song, a great conversation follows discussing why a seal could not really live on a farm. This activity can be repeated numerous times which can encourage rich conversations on animal habitats.

#### **Car talks – Social engagement.**

Promoting social and emotional learning can strengthen knowledge about feelings and getting along well with others. Children need to be able to process their feelings in a positive manner and recognize the emotions of those around them. One strategy is to

pause while reading a children's book in which the illustration displays strong emotion. Ask the child to deconstruct the illustration, especially the facial cues. Helping a young child to recognize and verbalize strong emotions in others is a huge achievement in social emotional learning. Developing empathy, good decision making, strong friendships, and the ability to overcome challenges will help the child adapt to different surroundings and social settings effectively. Often role-playing social situations with children is helpful in preparing for potential issues. For example, if "John" wants to play by himself at recess but "Olivia" asks to play, role playing possible responses from "John" will equip him with the ability to say no, but in a way which is respectful of other children's feelings. An example response from "John" might be, "Thanks for asking, but I just want a little quiet time right now." This enables him to effectively communicate his needs while not upsetting others. Additional ideas a teacher could suggest or encourage parents to try include:

- Model positive behavior daily;
- Encourage and reward kindness towards others;
- Create activities that require collaboration with others;
- Ask the child how they are feeling to open communication and express emotions accurately;
- Create a structured, supportive, and safe environment;

- Listen and follow directions;
- Promote self-worth by using growth mindset techniques (Ricci, 2013).

**Car talks – Active listening.** It is extremely important to create active listening skills in a young learner. This is critical for reading, social interactions, communication and language development. Having a child practice active listening skills through structured listening activities is a great way to enrich a growing mind. Suggestions to parents to utilize while on car rides could be:

- ❖ Audio stories. Children could benefit from following along with the words of the book or engage their imaginations without text.
- Games. Encourage mimicked imitations of steady beats or sounds.
- Rhymes. These help to strengthen vocabulary and help children retain important information.
- Your own creativity. Tell the child a story. Use their name to make it relevant to them or those they know. Be creative and let your imagination run wild. After the story, ask the child comprehension questions and their favorite parts. You could even record these stories for future use.
- Cultural based. Introduce a foreign language through songs. Children’s brains are sponges while they are young. Playing an upbeat, “catchy” song could help them learn and retain a foreign language much faster.

### **Conclusion**

Early childhood is a time of tremendous intellectual growth for young children. This

manuscript encouraged teachers to relay various models of communication to parents. Doyle and Bramwell (2006) state that for maximum student achievement to occur in school, there needs to be a partnership with parents and families. “Teachers are, however, often challenged to find the means and time to establish and maintain this positive connection with families” (p. 562). Rather than adding stress to the parent’s day, the models suggested can be completed within the natural flow of the day. The suggested models can begin in the classroom, such as *Car Talk*, and empower parents to utilize valuable time with their children to engage, enhance, and encourage dialogue.

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Corresponding author: Jill Raisor can be contacted at [jmraisor@usi.edu](mailto:jmraisor@usi.edu)

Gina Berridge, Ph.D., Stacey Keown, Ed.D, Jill Raisor, Ph.D. at [University of Southern Indiana](http://University of Southern Indiana).

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