Listen to yourself sometime when you are talking with the children in your class. Many of us spend our day either giving directions or asking questions. These are by necessity very short, to the point interactions.

Each one of us has a powerful teaching tool at our disposal, if we only use it:

**Conversations!**

Create activities that inspire conversation. Encourage engagement and stimulate discussion by providing books that have interesting topics, materials that involve children in new and innovative creations, activities.

Be accessible. Sit down in the science center. Join the art table. We need to be physically present in order to stimulate conversation. If we are constantly filling out paperwork, or preparing for the next activity, conversations can’t happen.

Listen. What are the children creating? What are they thinking about? What should you talk about with them?

Ask open-ended questions. Follow up on what the children are saying by asking questions that show you are genuinely interested in what they are saying.

Repeat and expand. Acknowledge the child’s comments by repeating what was said, then expand on it using more advanced language and new vocabulary.

Wait. Be sure to wait for a response! We often have so much to say that we forget to give the children the opportunity to think and respond.

**Talk about what you are doing.** Describe what you are doing and why. Provide the names of the objects and actions the children are seeing.

Talk about what the children are doing. Use this as a chance to expand the children’s language and vocabulary for activities or routines that they are involved with on a daily basis.

Be a good language model. Use full sentences that have interesting words which describe objects and actions. Encourage the children to use creative language and vocabulary that you have introduced.

Watch the directive language. A conversation is not the time to tell the children what they should be doing. It is the time to expand and elaborate on what they are saying, to introduce new ideas and vocabulary.

Take the time!

Have meaningful conversations with children!
Talking to Make a Difference: Conversations

We know that high quality early education represents one of the best investments that society can make for promoting successful educational outcomes for all children, but particularly for children who are at risk (Heckman & Masterov, 2007). Early education, it is done well, can significantly erase or minimize the achievement gaps that exist for many of our children (Barnett, 2011; Camilli, Vargas, Ryan, & Barnett, 2010; Pianta, Barnett, Burchinal, & Thornburg, 2009). The evidence is so overwhelming, that 39 of this country’s 50 states have elected to provide public-funded prekindergarten for its preschoolers (Barnett, Carolan, Fitzgerald, & Squires, 2011). The most recent report published by the National Institute for Early Education Research, The State of Preschool 2011, estimates that these 39 states provided prekindergarten services for 28% of all 4-year olds in this country. Unfortunately, Indiana is not of those states. In the absence of funding and state leadership, Indiana preschoolers have to rely on a patchwork system of services that falls short of the needed capacity to serve children who need these services most (Indiana Education Roundtable, 2012).

In 2012, we initiated a study to investigate how well existing early education programs in Indiana were doing. We were interested in seeing how our classrooms performed in relation to other states. We wanted to see how well our practices aligned with current research evidence documenting effective early education, and we were curious to see how the different programs in our state compared with one another. We sent out invitations to all Head Start programs, licensed child care centers and public school preschools in the state. Video-recorded observations were completed in 81 classrooms that were geographically and socio-economically representative: 28 licensed child care centers; 27 Head Start classrooms, and; 26 public school classrooms. We recorded only in-class, morning activities; and analyzed each observation using two tools; the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008), and the Emerging Academic Snapshot (EAS) (Ritchie, Howes, Kraft-Sayre, & Weiser, 2002).

The CLASS focuses on three broad domains of effective teacher-child interactions that characterize children’s classroom experiences: Emotional Support, Organizational Support, and Instructional Support. Emotional Support captures how teachers help children develop positive relationships, enjoyment in learning, comfort in the classroom, and appropriate levels of independence. Classroom Organization focuses on how well teachers manage the classroom to maximize learning and keep children engaged. The Instructional Support domain involves how teachers promote children’s thinking and problem solving, use feedback to deepen understanding, and help children develop more complex language skills. The Emerging Academic Snapshot measures the types and frequency of activities and instruction to which children are exposed. The types of activities recorded include common preschool activities such as free choice time, whole group time, basic routines, small group instruction, individual work time, and meal/snack times. It further looks at children’s exposure to various curricular areas, including aesthetics (art, music, dance), literacy/language, math, science, and social studies. Some teacher actions (instruction) are also included.

We hope that the information we gained from this study benefits both policy makers and classroom practitioners. For policy makers, our goal is to establish a comparative baseline of program quality from which clear directions and decisions can be made to enhance preschool services in Indiana. For practitioners, our hope is that the insights we made about the presence (and absence) of evidence-based early education practices can inform their decisions concerning classroom schedules, curricula, and teaching practices.

This series of tip sheets looks at some of the findings of our research in a quick, one-page format. More information, including a breakdown of the data and more detailed discussion can be found on the Early Childhood Center website.