

**NURTURING PLAY AND  
CREATIVITY THROUGH  
EVERYDAY  
CONVERSATIONS**

---

Rebecca Rolland, EdD  
August 7th, 2024




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

1

### WELCOME!

This talk is designed to explore the power of everyday conversation to nurture play and creativity in children and develop their full potential.

*Small moments accumulate.*




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

2

- 
 Reveal the power of enhancing conversations in our daily lives
- 
 Offer tools and strategies to nurture children's play and creativity, exploring their talents alongside them
- 
 Give you key principles you can apply every day with children

### GOALS OF THIS TALK:

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

3

### THE EARLY YEARS ARE THE MOST CRITICAL

“Stated simply, understanding the fundamental importance of the early years needs to become deeply embedded in the **basic fabric of society** if we are going to achieve truly transformative change in attitudes and behaviour.”

—Dr. Jack Shonkoff of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University.



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

4

### OUR EVERYDAY CONVERSATIONS HAVE LONG-TERM STAYING POWER

It all has to do with how you respond to a child's response

Think of opening up a dialogue, not shutting it down



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

5

### CONSIDER THIS SCENARIO:

“Daria” and “Jason,” two kindergarten students, are playing together, creating a throne out of cardboard and a crown out of metal tubes. They are in the middle of making the crown when Jason says, “You know what? I think this would be cooler if it was an *underwater* crown. What if it had seaweed and seashells?”

“But then the queen would have to be underwater,” Daria says.

“That’s not the assignment,” the teacher says. “Come on, let’s finish up.”



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

6

### LET'S CONSIDER:

*What if the same scenario took place, but this was the way it happened?*

"Daria" and "Jason," two kindergarten students, are playing together, creating a throne out of cardboard and a crown out of metal tubes. They are in the middle of making the crown when Jason says, "You know what? I think this would be cooler if it was an underwater crown. What if it had seaweed and seashells?"

"But then the queen would have to be underwater," Daria says.

"What if she was?" the teacher asks. "What would her name be?"

"Queen Sea," Jason says.

"Queen Seashell," Daria says. "But then we'd have to change her throne too."

"Yeah, let's make it a submarine," Jason says.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

7

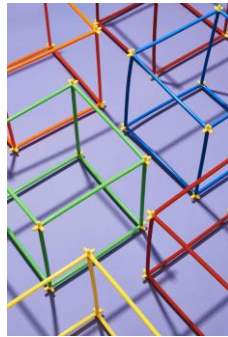
### LET'S CONSIDER:

How did the two scenarios differ in terms of:

- The language the children would likely use?
- The interactions they would have with each other and the teacher?
- The imaginative skills they were building?
- The empathy and collaboration skills they were building?

And most important:

- The way in which they learned their ideas mattered?



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

8

### CONSIDER THE POWER OF PRETEND PLAY

*On imagination:* One thing becomes another (a bowl becomes a crown)

*On language and idea generation:* Brainstorming lots of uses for a crown

*On expressing a range of emotions:* Pretending to be an angry queen or happy king

*On joy and motivation:* Choosing which character you would most like to be



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

9

### SMALL MOMENTS ACCUMULATE

Through stretching children's ideas...  
Through building their creativity...

We build stronger relationships...  
While developing their full potential and enhancing their gifts



10

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### KEY TAKEAWAY FROM THIS TALK

Play is the most powerful way to build learning, relationship-building, and social skills...

\*And at all ages, the Rich Talk method of conversation can help nurture it!



11

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### DEEPENING QUESTIONS, NOT JUST ANSWERING THEM:

Shows children you are interested in their minds  
Helps them deepen their understanding  
Models for them how to think aloud with complex ideas  
Builds your relationship and engages you all kids in the classroom



12

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### HELP CHILDREN BUILD ON EACH OTHER'S IDEAS

- "What might you add to what he just said?"
- "How could you change one thing about her story?"
- "How could you create a slightly different ending?"
- "How can you COMBINE those two stories?"




---

---

---

---

---

---

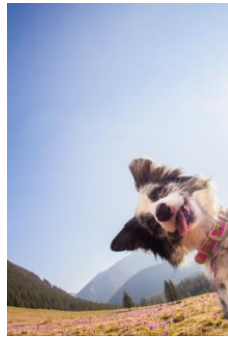
---

---

13

### WHAT IS PLAY, EXACTLY?

- "Fun"
- "Undirected"
- "A thing all children (and animals) do"
- "A way of learning"
- "Play is the state of mind that one has when absorbed in an activity that provides enjoyment and a suspension of sense of time. And play is self-motivated so you want to do it again and again." – Dr. Stuart Brown




---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

14

### WE WILL CONSIDER PLAY

1. "Intrinsically motivated"
2. Involves "active engagement"
3. Results in "joyful discovery"

Yogman, 2018

Think of "What if" and "What about we" questions:  
 "What if we made this flip over?"  
 "How about we try something totally different for the tail?"

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

15

### ADD PLAYFUL THINKING + LEARNING

Thinking of *many ideas, not just one*  
Imagining and inventing  
Thinking in flexible ways



Keep in mind:  
There is no one "right" way to play—it's all about personal style and a tailored approach

16

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### HOW DO OUR CONVERSATIONS HELP PLAY?

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| Support   | Support children to think flexibly                  |
| Expand    | Expand their imaginations                           |
| Encourage | Encourage collaboration between children            |
| Nurture   | Nurture executive function and motivation           |
| Support   | Support processing of trauma and difficult emotions |
| Develop   | Develop the whole child—starting with joy!          |

17

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### CREATIVITY HAS LONG-TERM IMPACTS

One key "creativity" measure, the Torrance Test of Creative Thinking, predicted creative achievement in children:

- One year later
- Five years later
- Ten years later
- Fifteen years later
- Fifty years later



18

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

BUT AS A SOCIETY, WE ARE PUSHING AGAINST PLAY

“Harvard professor Rebecca Rolland: ‘We are turning children into people who act robotically’

“Her book ‘The Art of Talking to Children’ is a guide that offers key points for changing daily logistical conversations into chats that encourage creativity and strengthen family bonds.”

—El Pais, 2023

Horizontal lines for writing notes.

19

MANY FACTORS PLAY A ROLE

--Structural factors:

- Lack of access to green space
- Crime and fear of crime

--Cultural factors:

- Overuse of screens
- Push to “get through” curricula
- Focus on “success at all costs”

Horizontal lines for writing notes.

20

As of the 2019-20 school year, what percentage of US schools surveyed allowed teachers to prohibit recess for bad behavior (“keeping kids inside?”)

- 15 percent
- 25 percent
- 45 percent
- 75 percent

<https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/cbrowse.cfm?id=1660000>

SCHOOLS ARE STILL LINKING RECESS AND BEHAVIOR

Horizontal lines for writing notes.

21

### IN SCHOOLS AND DAYCARES: PLAY MISCONCEPTIONS

- "Play versus learning"
- "Let's get through curricula"
- "Self-guided play is the only kind of play"
- "Play is for outside only"



22

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

Initiation,  
response,  
evaluation



"That's right,"  
"that's wrong," or  
"maybe," and  
moving on



Teaches children,  
but misses deeper  
opportunities for  
dialogue

DEFAULT MODE  
OF CLASSROOM  
TALK: IRE

23

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### THE CONSEQUENCES: SHORT- AND LONG-TERM

- Children feel a lack of control and autonomy over their own lives
- 1 in 11 children diagnosed with an anxiety disorder
- Anxiety has increased over the past 20 years

[https://www.cdc.gov/od/odas/announcements/Health\\_Technology\\_Uncertainty\\_Report.htm](https://www.cdc.gov/od/odas/announcements/Health_Technology_Uncertainty_Report.htm)  
<https://www.khanacademy.com/a/mental-health-research-national-survey-cdbb-ans-health>

24

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



### HOW DOES PLAY HELP CHILDREN?

- 1. Develops self-regulation skills
- 2. Builds a sense of personal agency and control
- 3. Promotes internal motivation
- 4. Builds language skills
- 5. Builds enjoyment of the outdoors
- 6. Nurtures empathy
- 7. Builds social skills



NAEYC, 2009

25

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### SELF-REGULATION AND EXECUTIVE FUNCTION THRIVE THROUGH PLAY

Think of storytelling, play acting, collaborating

- Prioritizing:** "Which of these steps do I need to do first?"
- Attentional control:** "How can I persist enough to finish this project?"
- Generating ideas:** "What are three ways of finding a solution?"
- Managing competing goals:** "Which is the most important step?"

26

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### HOW DOES PLAY HELP SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS?

- Healthfully express difficult feelings
- Consider many solutions to problems
- Ask "what if?" without negative consequences
- Explore and express a range of emotions
- Learn to negotiate and empathize

Garaigordobil, 2022



27

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## OUTDOOR PLAY IS ESPECIALLY CRITICAL

In 12 out of 14 studies reviewed, "nature exposure" from 10 to 90 minutes helped children refocus attention and bounce back from mental fatigue



<https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10648-021-09031-8>

28

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## AT A LARGER SCALE, PLAY MAY HELP CLOSE ACHIEVEMENT GAPS

--Report by LEGO foundation of children 3-6 in 18 countries:

--Across 26 studies, children from disadvantaged communities (including those in Rwanda and Bangladesh) showed greater gains in literacy, learning, and motor development when teachers mixed direct instruction and free and guided play



29

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## NEW RESEARCH: IT'S ALL ABOUT THE CONVERSATIONAL TURNS

These turns link to:

- Changes in language skills
- Brain changes in language and social areas

Enhancing these turns enhances children's skills

Talk is both a language activity and a social activity



Romeo et al., 2018, 2021

30

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### THE TURNS CREATE OPPORTUNITIES

Instead of one question and one answer....Think of a series.

Key point: How are you responding to a child's response?



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

31

### WHAT IS RICH TALK, AND HOW CAN IT HELP?

An approach that emphasizes:

- **ADAPTING** to children's contexts, emotions, ages, and stages
- **BACK AND FORTH** dialogue between children and adults, and among children
- **CHILD-DRIVEN** conversations, starting with children's questions and ideas

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

32

### ADAPTIVE: MEETING CHILDREN WHERE THEY ARE

- Age
- Setting
- Situation
- Background
- Cognitive and emotional levels
- Mood and motivation
- Interests
- Peer relationships
- Family relationships

*...in an approach that evolves with each child, over time*

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

33

BACK AND FORTH AND "ROUND AND ROUND"

34

**Conversational turns:**

Moving from adult to child, to child, to adult, etc.

Focused less on **question and answer**, more on **deepening dialogue**

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

CHILD-DRIVEN: START WITH WHAT INTERESTS A CHILD OR CHILDREN

35

Ask children to listen to each other

Ask for each child to add a contribution

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---



36

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

# FOCUS ON FULL PRESENCE AND "SHOWING UP"

"Embodied, face-to-face talk"

Phone/tech use to supplement in-person conversations

Noticing and responding to gesture, tone, touch, body language

Children get support and encouragement for their "big ideas"

37

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## THE SEVEN PILLARS OF RICH TALK

- Learning
- Empathy
- Confidence
- Social skills
- Creativity + play
- Openness
- Temperament

Our focus today:  
Play and  
creativity



38

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## SO WHAT CAN YOU DO?

- Become a "play advocate" in your school
- Start emphasizing play in everyday conversations
- Teach about the power of play in ways that have ripple effects



39

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## ACTION PLAN: CREATE A PLAYFUL LEARNING CULTURE

**Start with the why:** Teach parents, colleagues, administration about the power of play

**Emphasize documentation:** Show changes in children's questions and processes

**Use scaffolds and sentence starters:** Make many visual opportunities for play

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

40

### HOW CAN DOCUMENTING PLAY LOOK?

Wall space designated for children's "hard questions"

Photos of children's processes and quotes from their explanations

Records (photos, notes) of changes in children's play stages

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

41

### WHAT ABOUT FOR CHILDREN WHO DON'T WANT TO PLAY?

Emphasize alternatives to the current "play narrative"  
• "If you don't want to build a ship, what else could you build?"

Allow children to work in solitude if feeling overwhelmed  
• "If you have your own idea, work on it and then show us"

Emphasize play as inquiry—it doesn't have to be funny!  
• "Try exploring other ways of solving that problem."

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

42

### USE A "PLAY PRESCRIPTION": NURTURE WHOLE CHILDREN THROUGH EVERYDAY TALK

Think: FUN

**F:** Find opportunities to model play and playful thinking

**U:** Use conversations to explore children's deeper questions and ideas

**N:** Nurture empathy and creativity through perspective-taking in play



43

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### SET THE FOUNDATION: PLAYING TOGETHER WELL

1

1. Talk through norms with children

2

2. Teach "Both/and": "I might also try it that way"

3

3. Flip the "wrong" answer: "For what question could that answer be right?"

44

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### F: FIND OPPORTUNITIES TO MODEL

Start with the environment: Where can you put scaffolds or signs?

**Example #1:** (in a pretend play center): "These bears look hungry. What do you think they should do next?"

**Example #2:** (on a bulletin board): "What would a bear and a pony look like if you mixed them up? Add your drawing here."

**Example #3:** (in a water play area): "Many boats move people and objects—but how could you move boats?"



45

---

---

---

---

---

---

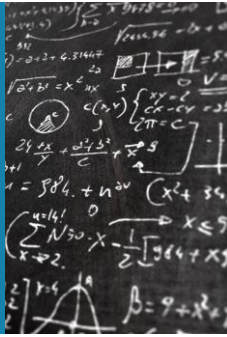
---

---

### F: FIND OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH QUESTIONS AND STARTERS

Use the wall space for What if and What's next questions:

- "What might you and your classmates do next?"
- "What if you tried it a different way?"
- "What if you asked a classmate for their opinion?"
- "What if you started your design the opposite way?"



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

46

### F: FIND OPPORTUNITIES THROUGH NON-EXAMPLES AND "ERRORS"

- "What is *not* an example of a mammal?"
- "If you were building a plane, what would you make sure *not* to do?"
- "How many non-examples of a city can you find?" (underwater, countryside)
- "In this description, how many problems or mistakes can you find?"

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

47

### NEXT: USING PLAYFUL TALK TO DEEPEN LEARNING

- "What new animals can we create with these materials?"
- "How sure are you of your answer to that? Rate 1-10"
- "Let's use that new word and make up a joke with it."

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

48



### THE THREE ES: RICH TALK IN ACTION

|   |   |   |
|---|---|---|
| <p style="text-align: center;"><b>1</b></p> <p><b>Expand:</b> Stretch what a child says, adding ideas, questions, and/or vocabulary</p> | <p style="text-align: center;"><b>2</b></p> <p><b>Explore:</b> Move beyond the here and now</p> | <p style="text-align: center;"><b>3</b></p> <p><b>Evaluate:</b> See the process and product of thinking with a critical eye</p> |
|---|---|---|

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

49

### TRY THE THREE ES FOR PLAYFUL THINKING

After a child says, "That's a weird food":

**Expand:** "What seems weird to you about it? Is it a food you've tried before?"

**Explore:** "What does it remind you of?" "How would you describe its smell?"

**Evaluate:** "Was your prediction about what it would taste like right?"




---

---

---

---

---




---

---

---

50

### FOCUS ON QUESTION LADDERS

-  Concrete to abstract, and back again
-  Go "up" or "down" based on children's responses and understanding
-  Round-and-round conversation lets you respond more deftly

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

51

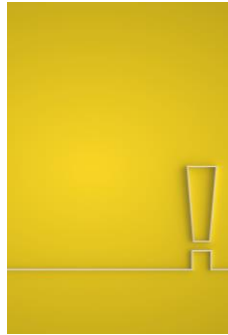
### EXAMPLE QUESTION LADDER

"What are those ants doing?"

"How do ants learn to go in a line like that?"

"How do you think acting like that helps them? Are there ways it doesn't help?"

"In what ways do people in our society act like those ants?"



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

52

### AT THE SAME TIME:

**Try not to make assumptions:** "That must be your least favorite."

**Instead, try to start open-ended:** "Can you tell me more about why you like it?"

**Move more close-ended, if children are unsure:** "Is it this or that?"

**Focus on validating feelings and experiences:** "That does sound scary."



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

53

### N: NURTURE EMPATHY AND CREATIVITY



Focus on perspective-taking



Flip the conversation in books: "What is the baseball player seeing/thinking/feeling?" "What about the girl in the stands?"



Ask children to describe in words and images, using all the senses

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

54



"That bridge looks like it was tough to build."



"What are you thinking of trying after that?"



"Can you tell me more about that part on the front?"



"Which part is finished, and which are you still working on?"

### LET YOUR COMMENTS BE AN INVITATION

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

55

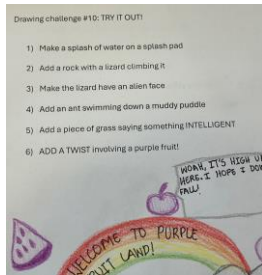
### TRY GAMES THAT SUPPORT PERSPECTIVE-TAKING

"The drawing game:"

--Create a series of 5-6 steps with "absurd" elements

--Invite each child to create an image, then explain their drawing

--Notice something special about each drawing



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

56

### HELP CHILDREN WHO MAY BE SHUT DOWN OR TRAUMATIZED

|  |
|--|
| Offer opportunities to draw instead of write               |
| Use increased modeling and wait time                       |
| Notice if you need extra support or a referral             |
| Remember: Play is a mode of processing (if supported well) |
|  |
|  |

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

57

### START WITH YOUR OWN PERSPECTIVE-TAKING: TRY "CURIOUS WAITING"



Spend a few minutes sitting quietly with a child.



Watch as they draw, play, or work on a project.



Ask yourself: What are they showing me they are interested in?



Allow the answer to guide your comments.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

58

### THANK YOU, AND PLEASE STAY IN TOUCH!

Rebecca Rolland, EdD  
<http://www.rebeccarolland.com>  
(newsletter and website)  
Email:  
[rebecca\\_rolland@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:rebecca_rolland@gse.harvard.edu)  
Facebook: Rebecca Rolland Author  
LinkedIn: Rebecca Rolland  
Instagram: rebecca.g.rolland



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

59