

Responsive Classroom

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Teaching Children How to Converse

A Teacher Shares

by Courtney Fox

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These days, curriculum often recommends using "partner chats," "turn-and-talk," and other one-on-one conversation strategies to help students reflect on and deepen their learning. Although it may seem like a simple thing, chatting with a partner involves a complex set of skills that many children do not come to school with: listening and speaking in turn, staying on topic, and not monopolizing the conversation, to name just a few.



Conversation skills are important for academic and social learning at all grade levels. The school day is full of conversations—we talk with each other in large group gatherings, at work and choice times, and of course during snack, recess, and lunch. Children who are not skilled in this arena may struggle, academically and socially. That's why it's important to teach conversation skills explicitly. I've found that taking time to teach first grade students how to chat with a partner has had striking benefits—for individual students, and for our classroom community.

First graders tend to come to school using one of two distinct conversational styles: some interrupt constantly, while others rarely speak up. As you can imagine, this makes for pretty lopsided partner chats! So, I teach conversation skills very specifically, starting at the beginning of the year, and I provide lots of structured opportunities for the children to practice. Early on I focus on helping some students learn how to be patient and not interrupt, while helping others become more assertive and speak up more.

Simple Beginnings

To start, I set aside a few minutes after lunch each day for working on partner chat skills. I begin by showing the children how to do the most basic things, such as sitting "knee-to-knee" and looking at their partner. Then I pair them up and the pairs sit together to practice.

Our first conversation topic is "What did you have for lunch?"—a question I know each child will definitely be able to answer. At first the partners simply tell each other, one at a time, what they had for lunch. We work up to something that looks more like a "real" conversation:

Partners Susanna and Brendan sit facing each other.

Susanna asks, "What did you have for lunch today?"

"I had chicken nuggets," Brendan replies. Then he asks, "What did you have for lunch?"

"I had chicken nuggets, too," says Susanna, "and chocolate milk."

Once both partners have shared, they move to the rug and take a seat in our circle.

After a few days, I also start having students report back to the group. For instance, after partners share with each other, we'll do a quick around-the-circle share about what our partners had for lunch. This gives the children an added reason to listen carefully to their partners and remember what they heard. It also gives each child a chance to practice speaking to the whole class.

Building More Complex Skills

I build on these simple beginnings all year with additional mini-lessons and lots of chances to practice. Students talk with a partner many times each day: during **Morning Meeting** (</node/1306>) sharing, during read-alouds, during math when they compare solutions, etc. I scaffold my teaching so that when the children begin talking with partners about academic work, they are ready to do so independently. By the end of the year, they will become skilled conversationalists—able to engage in rich dialogues with each other, with the older students who are their book buddies, and even with adults.

An Invitation

This school year I'm writing about how I teach partner chat skills on the *Responsive* blog. I'll be describing what I'm doing in my classroom and giving practical tips for adapting those techniques for your own use. I'll write about how I scaffold my teaching, how I assign partners, and new things I learn from my students this year. I'll be sharing ideas once a month. I hope you'll follow along, leave comments and ask questions, and try teaching these skills for yourself!



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