

Talking seriously with children is good for their language proficiency

May 12 2010

How adults approach children aged 3 to 6 years during conversations has a major influence on their language acquisition. Those who address children as fully-fledged conversation partners lay an early basis for the development of 'academic language', says Dutch researcher Lotte Henrichs.

Children at a primary school need a certain type of language proficiency: academic language. Academic language is not an independent, new language, but is the language that teachers use and expect from the pupils. It enables children to understand instructions and to demonstrate their knowledge in an efficient manner. Academic language is characterised by difficult, abstract words and complex sentence structures. The language often contains a lot of clauses and conjunctions and due to the methods of argument and analysis it has a scientific appearance.

Henrichs demonstrated that children are already confronted with academic language in the nursery school. They already hear a lot of academic language from the teacher and are often expected to use academic language themselves. The extent to which academic language is used at home was found to differ strongly between families. An essential aspect is how parents approach their children during conversations. If children are given the opportunity to make meaningful contributions to conversations, they often use characteristics of academic language proficiency naturally. In addition to this, the knowledge of academic language depends on the extent to which parents read to their

children, tell them stories and hold conversations about interesting subjects.

Lotte Henrichs investigated how very young children in particular acquire this academic language proficiency and the role played by child raisers and schools in this process. Within the large research programme that Henrichs carried out her research in, 150 children aged 3 to 6 years were followed for a period of three years. All of the [children](#) lived in the Netherlands and came from Turkish, Moroccan-Berber and Dutch families. From all these participants, a subgroup of 25 Dutch families were involved in the in-depth study of Henrichs.

Provided by Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO)

Citation: Talking seriously with children is good for their language proficiency (2010, May 12) retrieved 9 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2010-05-children-good-language-proficiency.html>

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