

# Talking about the past & future

Rebecca Andrews & Penny Van Bergen

## WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

High-quality educator-child conversations are associated with positive cognitive, social and emotional outcomes for children. One important type of talk is where the conversation is “decontextualized”: that is, about experiences in the child’s past or future.

Usually decontextualized conversations are facilitated by an adult conversation partner, such as a parent or educator, who can scaffold the structure and the content of the unfolding narrative. This scaffolding of the narrative is important, because it allows children to think about the past and future more fully than they are capable of alone.



Conversations about the past and future support young children in learning how to remember past events, how to talk about these events with others, how to plan for the future, and how to understand temporal concepts. Together these skills contribute to the development of autobiographical memory and future thinking. Importantly, there are also benefits for learning about emotions. By discussing times when the child was excited, sad, or angry, and by anticipating future emotions together, children learn about emotions when they are no longer in a state of arousal.

### How are high-quality conversations about the past and future measured?

Reminiscing and future talk is measured on a dimension of elaboration. An elaborative style is optimal because it is related to child participation. If you use an elaborative style in your conversations with young children, this assists children to show greater recall for the event being discussed and for other events too.

## PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

### What does an elaborative style of talking about the past and future look like?

When discussing past and future events with young children, educators should:

- Provide rich and detailed event information (e.g. “Yes, that was last Tuesday!”, “and Sam had a red ball”)
- Ask open ended questions (e.g. “Why were we late that time?”, “How did you feel when that happened?”)
- Provide evaluative feedback (e.g. “That is true, I also remember the magician came to kindy”)

In addition, it is really important to discuss topics that are meaningful for the child. The aim is to encourage the child to co-construct the narrative, so it is important they are motivated to do so! You can do this by:

- Linking the event information to the child’s existing knowledge base
- Following the child’s lead if they take the conversation to a new direction
- Discussing how the child felt at the time and why

## FURTHER READINGS

- Andrews, R., Van Bergen, P. & Wyver, S. (2019). Reminiscing and future talk conversations between young children, their early childhood educators and mothers. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 49(4), p. 254 – 268.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



**Dr Rebecca Andrews**, Lecturer in Early Childhood & Deputy Director of Initial Teacher Education, Department of Educational Studies.

Rebecca is interested in early childhood teacher education, including early childhood philosophy and pedagogy. Her research has a focus on the socio-emotional and language aspects of development. Rebecca's main area of research examines autobiographical memory through educator-child reminiscing and future talk.



**Dr Penny Van Bergen**, Associate Dean of Teaching and Learning & Associate Professor in Educational Psychology, Department of Educational Studies.

Penny has a background in psychology, with an interest in mapping children's social interactions that best facilitate learning and development. Her research focuses on children's development of memory and emotion skills in social contexts, with strong applications to the field of education.

---

### FIND OUT MORE

Macquarie University NSW 2109 Australia  
[cls@mq.edu.au](mailto:cls@mq.edu.au)  
[mq.edu.au/research/child-learning](http://mq.edu.au/research/child-learning)

ABN 90 952 801 237  
CRICOS Provider 00002J



**MACQUARIE**  
University