

# High-Quality Language Interaction

Intentional and responsive support for children’s developing language and literacy is a critical component of a high-quality classroom. High-quality language interactions stimulate children’s vocabulary development and boost communication and learning skills. Language becomes the powerful self-talk to help children plan and carry out their own behavior. Children with strong language skills have more opportunities to engage in positive social interactions with others. High-quality language interaction and literacy support are essential for children in every Pre-K setting.

The Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale® Third Edition (ECERS-3) places a priority on high-quality language interactions and responsiveness of teachers to the interests, play, and learning needs of children. The language samples introduced below are aligned with Language and Literacy subscale items 12 -14 of the ECERS-3: Helping children expand vocabulary, encouraging children to use language, and staff use of books with children.

## GUIDANCE FOR TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE AND TRAINING SPECIALISTS

1. Review the language goals related to the ECERS-3 subscales with practitioners.
2. Review the language samples provided.
3. Generate additional language samples by documenting interactions observed during formal and informal interactions.
4. Brainstorm additional language samples by focusing on what high-quality interactions “look and sound like.”
5. Promote intentional use of high-quality language interactions throughout the day in formal and informal contexts.
6. Aim for language practices that address the highest levels of quality as defined by the ECERS-3.

## NOTES AND RESTRICTIONS

- The content of this document is for use by training and technical assistant specialists in the state of Illinois that support quality improvement for programs in ExceleRate Illinois.
- The examples represent just some of the language strategies that can be used by staff to ensure high-quality interactions.
- Technical assistance and training specialists should refer to the ECERS-3 book and notes for definitions, clarifications, and additional information.
- The language samples provided are not to be memorized, but should be used to encourage continuous quality improvement and increase high-quality language interactions with young children.

*Harms, T., Clifford, Richard, & Cryer, D. (2015). Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale, Third Edition, New York: Teachers College Press.*

## HIGH-QUALITY INTERACTION GOALS

### Language and literacy

- Using specific vocabulary
- Using a wide range of vocabulary
- Relating words to children's experience
- Using exact words for people, places, things, and actions
- Explaining the meaning of unfamiliar words
- Introducing new vocabulary
- Introducing words and concepts using materials, displays, and activities
- Accommodating a diagnosed special need, family language need, or individual need
- Introducing themes and topics

### Encouraging vocabulary

- Listening and responding with open-ended questions
- Responding in positive and appropriate ways to children
- Increasing the number of staff-child conversations
- Encouraging children to communicate
- Avoiding negative interactions
- Encouraging individual communication (child specific)
- Ensuring a relaxed environment where children can talk freely
- Responding positively to children's communication
- Helping children communicate with each other
- Talking about home and family or non-school topics.

### Using books with children

- Engaging children in positive book experiences
- Encouraging children's engagement
- Showing interest and enjoyment in books
- Using accommodations with books
- Participating actively in reading
- Relating books to themes
- Using books informally
- Using books to answer questions

## LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

### Using specific vocabulary

**EXAMPLE:** Staff may say, “Here you go,” as a child is handed a plate of food. To advance language, staff can say, “For lunch, we are having beans, potatoes, and chicken.”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff may say, “You can play with that if you want to.” To advance language, staff can say, “You and Caleb enjoy figuring out puzzles. Would you like to work on the giraffe puzzle?”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff may say, “Give it to him.” Or “That is hers not yours.” To advance language, staff can say, “I see you want a cup. Let’s get another cup, so that Mavis can have one, too.” Or, “You have Josiah’s jacket. Your jacket is still hanging in your cubby.”

### Using a wide range of vocabulary

**EXAMPLE:** “All the children wearing pink can line up.” A child responds, “I have pink on my shirt.” The teacher expands on the child’s words by saying, “Yes, you have a dark pink shirt that is a magenta color. Gina’s shirt is light pink. Both of you have pink shirts.”

**EXAMPLE:** At an activity table, staff says, “I see you loaded the brown and white cars onto the green transport truck. That is a good way to get the cars to the dealer. A dealer is a person who sells cars at a store.”

### Relating words to children’s experience

**EXAMPLE:** To relate words to children’s experience, staff can help children remember events or look forward to events. “We will go on a field trip to the fire station tomorrow. What day of the week is it today? What day will it be tomorrow when we go to the fire station?”

**EXAMPLE:** To relate letters to children’s experiences, staff can say, “Today is Brennen’s birthday. That makes it a “B” day. What can we give Brennan for his birthday that begins with the letter B? Children may respond, “Balloons. Boats. Books. Baseball. Bubbles.”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff may relate letters to children’s experiences by asking, “We are eating bread. What letter sound says “b” as in the word bread? We are drinking milk. What letter sound says “mmm” as in the word milk?”

### Using words for people, places, things, and actions

**EXAMPLE:** At meal time, staff says, “The green beans are vegetables that are cooked. Remember we had raw carrots at snack? Carrots are vegetables too.”

**EXAMPLE:** During play, staff responds when a child says, “I have a big truck.” “Yes. You have a yellow truck. It is a yellow dump truck. A dump truck moves materials at a construction site.”

**EXAMPLE:** During clean-up, staff says to a child in dramatic play, “You may hang your shopping bag on the hooks next to the silk scarves in the dramatic play area.”

**EXAMPLE:** While serving lunch, staff says, “Today for lunch, we are having a grilled cheese sandwich. Mr. Jonas cut each sandwich into triangles for us. The small triangles are easier to hold with your fingers than a big square.”

**EXAMPLE:** While looking out the window, staff says, “The sun is shining outdoors today. It is not as chilly today as yesterday. Today there is a warm breeze. Do you think we will need a sweater?”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff can expand on language when giving instructions like, “Let’s water the plants.” Rich vocabulary can be added by saying, “The purple African violets are thirsty. Do you see the soil is dry and the leaves are curled? Let’s use the gentle spray nozzle to mist them with water.”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff can describe what children are doing. “You are having fun with the basketball. It can be bounced or tossed into the hoop. Do you want to keep the hoop low so that you can bounce the ball into it?”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff may expand on play options. “There is enough playdough for both of you. You can use the cookie cutters or the rollers to make patterns.”

### Explaining the meaning of unfamiliar words

**EXAMPLE:** Staff says, “A cooked vegetable means that the vegetable is heated up. Vegetables can be heated on a stove, in an oven, or in a microwave. How does your family cook vegetables?”

**EXAMPLE:** While pointing to a book, staff says, “The Very Hungry Caterpillar, by Eric Carle. Eric Carle is the author of this book. That means Mr. Carle wrote the words that tell the story. He is also the illustrator. That means Mr. Carle drew the pictures in his book to go along with the story. Sometimes the illustrator is a different person than the author.”

### Introducing new words

**EXAMPLE:** Staff helps a child retrieve toy cows from a shelf. To introduce words, staff says, “A group of cows is called a herd. Young cows are called heifers and bulls. You can put the heifers and bulls in the barn.”

**EXAMPLE:** At the lunch table, staff says, “Be careful.” To use this opportunity to introduce words, staff can say, “Push your plate away from the edge of the table. Another word for plate is dish. Push your dish away from the edge of the table.”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff comments to children playing in the block area, “That looks like fun.” To use this opportunity to introduce words, staff can say, “You are a good architect team. You planned and built a tall structure together.”

### Introducing words using materials, displays and activities

**EXAMPLE:** Staff compares two blocks with a child. “The rectangle block is longer than the square block. Can you see how the rectangle takes up more space on the floor?”

**EXAMPLE:** Instead of saying, “OK. Time to wash hands,” staff can elaborate. “Washing our hands with soap and rubbing them makes the germs rinse down the drain. When we play with sand outside, we get germs on our hands. Handwashing gets our hands clean before we eat.”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff can point to an animal poster and introduce the words grooming and shelter. “Do you see the veterinarian grooming the dog? When we brush a pet and clip his nails, we groom him. Do you see the dog in the dog house? When the dog sleeps inside the dog house, he has a warm shelter.”

**EXAMPLE:** When a child says, “dog,” staff can respond, “That is a black, fluffy beagle.”

**EXAMPLE:** Instead of buttoning a child’s coat and saying, “Here you go,” staff can say, “Your buttons are shaped like circles. You have circles on your pants, too. The small circles are called polka dots.”

### Accommodating a diagnosed special need, family language need, or individual need

**EXAMPLE:** Staff leads the lesson by saying one sentence in English and repeating it in Spanish. “Good morning children. Buenos dias niños.”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff introduces new vocabulary words behind and under by saying, “The bear is behind the door. The monkey is underneath the table.” Staff demonstrates the meaning of the words by holding a stuffed toy bear behind a small door and showing a stuffed toy monkey underneath a table.”

### Introducing themes and topics

**EXAMPLE:** When talking about seasons, staff says, “Today is the first day of autumn. Autumn is a season of the year when it gets cooler outside and the leaves on the trees begin to change colors. During the summer, you are home with your families. In autumn, you go back to school. You may hear someone use the word fall. Fall is another word for autumn.”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff says, “This week, our theme is spiders. What do we remember about spiders? Spiders spin webs to catch their food. When spiders walk, how many feet touch the ground? Right. Four feet touch the ground and four feet are raised.”

### Adding information and expanding on ideas

**EXAMPLE:** “Ketchup” says a child. The teacher expands on what the child says, “You have ketchup. Ketchup tastes tangy. It is made from tomatoes. Ketchup is the same color as tomatoes. It is red because tomatoes are red.”

**EXAMPLE:** A child says, “I saw a fuzzy worm.” Staff responds, “Yes, you saw a caterpillar. It looks like a fuzzy worm, but it has a soft fuzzy body and many legs. Do you see the caterpillar using his legs? A caterpillar spins a chrysalis and becomes a butterfly.”

**EXAMPLE:** A child says, “I hit the ball with a stick.” Staff responds, “Your stick is called a golf club. Golfers hit the ball with the club and try to knock it into the hole. When you get the ball in the hole on the first try, it is called a hole-in-one.”

## ENCOURAGING LANGUAGE

### Listening and responding with open-ended questions

**EXAMPLE:** To listen and respond, staff can ask children to explain their dramatic play scenario. “Tell me about your breakfast. Who is coming to eat breakfast with you?” “What are you selling at your restaurant? Do you have all the ingredients you need to make your meal?”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff says, “Your dad said you went to the zoo this weekend. What animals did you see at the zoo?” After a child responds, staff extends the conversation by asking, “What were the animals eating?” “What were the animals doing?” “What else did you see in the animal habitats?” Staff listens and matches questions to the child’s responses.

**EXAMPLE:** During snack, staff asks, “Do you like the peaches?” After listening to the children’s responses, she continues, “How did Mr. Timber cook our peaches today?”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff asks a child playing with construction materials, “What are you making?” The child responds, “A tower.” Staff says, “Tell me about your tower.” The child responds, “My tower is for the king and queen.” Staff asks, “Will anyone else live in the tower with the king and queen?” The child responds, “Yes. The boy prince will live with the king and queen.”

### Responding in positive and appropriate ways

**EXAMPLE:** During book reading, staff wants to respond when children answer her questions. When a child says, “Those monkeys want to have a hat like the man.” Staff responds, “That’s right. Why do you think the monkeys copied what the man did?” Another child says, “That man is just pretending to sleep.” Staff asks, “So you think the man is pretending to sleep? How can you tell?”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff want to show their full attention. Instead of answering, “Uh huh,” and “Alright,” staff are responsive to children who come to them. “Thank you for telling me. I am glad you figured out how to get the propellers to work.” “I can see that you got all of the bears back into the container. That took a lot of concentration.”

### Increasing the number of staff-child conversations

**EXAMPLE:** Staff asks a child to put a book on a shelf. The child asks, “Does it go here?” The teacher responds, “Yes.” To encourage turn-taking, staff says, “Do you see how your big book matches the size of the books on the shelf? How do you know where to put your other book?”

**EXAMPLE:** A single exchange sounds like this: “What are you building?” “A house.” “Where did you put the doll?” “In the stroller.” A conversation that goes back and forth continues with exchanges. During outdoor play, child says, “I have new shoes.” Staff responds, “I see you have new black shoes.” The child says, “I can run fast in my shoes.” Staff responds again, “I’ll bet you can run fast. Can you show me how you run?”

### Encouraging children to communicate

**EXAMPLE:** Staff encouraged children to communicate by noticing personal interests and asking questions. “I like the little kitten on your shirt. She is curled up in a basket. Would you like to choose a book to read about a kitten?”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff can encourage personal conversations about an activity by describing what children are doing and asking a question. “I see you and Melanie are taking your bears for a walk. Where are you and the bears going?”

**EXAMPLE:** During a snack or meal, staff focuses on children’s personal experience. “We are eating yogurt. Yogurt is made from milk. What do you eat at home that is made from milk?”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff says to a child during play, “Tell me about your new puppy. What do you need to care for him?” The child responds, “I got a bowl for water. I got a leash to take him for a walk.” Staff comments, “You can feed him. What else do you need for your puppy?” The child says, “I need a brush and I gotta take him to the vet.” Staff responds, “You have to take him to the vet. What will the veterinarian do?” The child answers, “The vet will take care of my puppy when he is sick.” (Repeating what the child says with correct grammar is called a recast. Repeat the sentence correctly, and then ask a question.)

**EXAMPLE:** Staff are talking with children during indoor gross motor play. Staff asks, “How many times did you jump?” Children respond, “One hundred times!” Staff says, “Your heart is beating fast. Can you put your hand on your heart and feel it beating? It is pumping blood to your muscles and making your muscles strong.” Children jump up and down and feel their hearts. They are excited and say, “I can feel my heart beating.”

### Avoiding negative interactions

**EXAMPLE:** A negative interaction might sound like: “I told you to cut it out.” “You are not supposed to be doing that.” “I don’t want to have to tell you that again.” Instead, staff can use positive redirection to draw children into a productive activity. “Let’s pick out a book together.” “I can see you need something to do. Do you want to use your strong muscles to put the blocks back onto the shelves, or help move the chairs?”

### Encouraging individual communication

**EXAMPLE:** Get on the child’s eye-level and listen as a child speaks. A child says, “I want to play with the playdough.” Staff responds, “I can see Jasmin just left the playdough table. You can sit in her chair. Would you like to use the rollers or shapes?” Staff waits until child chooses tools and stays to talk with the child about her play.

**EXAMPLE:** Staff notices that a child is struggling to take a puzzle from a shelf. Staff supports the child by helping him pull the puzzle out. “Do you want to take out all of the pieces first, or look underneath each piece first? Can you lift the knob on the horse?” Staff stays to support the child as he matches pieces to animal shaped slots.

**EXAMPLE:** During lunch, staff use sign language for “milk,” “please,” “thank you,” “more,” and “all done.” Some children use the signs in addition to talking. One child uses the signs alone.

### Ensuring a relaxed environment where children can talk freely

**EXAMPLE:** Staff says, “Why don’t you and Jessica work together on the puzzle? I see there is space on the green table.” Children are encouraged to talk about their work and play.

**EXAMPLE:** Staff says, “What center would you like to play in today? The child responds, “Blocks.” Staff helps the child elaborate and plan her play. “You want to build with blocks. What do you want to build today?” The child responds, “I need to make a barn to hold my animals.”

### Responding positively to children’s communication

**EXAMPLE:** A child asks, “May I use finger paints? Staff prepares several colors and asks, “What colors would you like to use?” Staff puts color samples on a paper so the child can see how they look. The child says, “I want to mix the yellow and green.” Staff responds, “You can use different utensils and

your fingers to make patterns in the light green paint.” The child says, “I want to use the feather.” Staff gives the child a feather and moves the can that holds the utensils closer so that the child can reach it.

**EXAMPLE:** A child is frustrated and grunts. Staff says, “I see you are frustrated. Can you tell me what you need?” Child grunts again. Staff says, “You can use your words to tell me. I will listen and help.” The child says, “My shoes aren’t tied right.” Staff assists child and says, “When your shoe laces bother you or come untied, you can ask for help. We can tie your shoes together.”

### Helping children communicate with each other

**EXAMPLE:** During dramatic play, two children are getting out plates and food. Staff asks about their play. “Are you working together at a restaurant? Here is a chef’s hat. Which of you will cook? Who will be the waiter? Here is an apron. What foods will you serve your customers today?” Staff gives the children time to answer and helps them get dressed for work.

**EXAMPLE:** During snack, a child bumps another child while sitting down. Staff says, “Say excuse me to Tommy. Let’s adjust your chairs so that you both have space.”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff observes two children pulling on a wagon. She says, “I can see you both need a wagon to pull your toys. Let’s get another wagon, and then you can both play.” Staff adds, “You can help each other get another wagon. Tell each other, ‘We need to get another wagon.’” The boys say, “We need another wagon.”

### Asking questions that require longer answers.

**EXAMPLE:** Staff are looking at a leaf collection in a wooden bowl with children. Staff asks the children, “How do you know which leaf comes from a pine tree?”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff have read a book about animals that store food for the winter. Staff asks, “Where do you think a squirrel would hide nuts? How will he remember the location to find them in the winter when he is hungry?”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff and children are talking about helping others. “Tell me about the way you help your family at home. Tell me about how you help your brothers and sisters.”

### Talking about home and family or non-school topics.

**EXAMPLE:** At a meal time, staff respond actively to children’s conversation. A child says, “We went swimming last night at my Grandma’s house.” Staff responds, “I know you like to spend time with your grandma. What else did you do with your sister and grandma?”

**EXAMPLE:** Children are climbing on outdoor equipment. A child says, “I went to gymnastics.” Staff responds, “When did you go?” The child answers, “Last night.” Staff asks, “What activities did you do at gymnastics?” The child responds, “I jumped on the trampoline. We did cartwheels and summersaults.” Staff says, “I like to watch you practice gymnastics outside, too.” Child says, “Watch me. I can do a cartwheel.”

## USING BOOKS WITH CHILDREN

### Engaging children in positive book experiences

**EXAMPLE:** Staff make baskets of books available that focus on a single topic. They place books about pets and caring for pets with the stuffed animals and veterinarian care dramatic play materials. When children are playing, staff say, “Let’s look in the book together to see how we can care for our pets.”

**EXAMPLE:** Staff encourage participation through puppets, the use of dramatic character voices, and conversation with children. Staff say, “What choice do you think the girl will make?” “How do you think the girl felt when she helped her friend?”

**EXAMPLE:** When a child asks a question, staff responds, “That is an important question. What do you think her mother will say?” After the child responds, staff says, “Let’s turn the page to find out.”

### Encouraging children’s engagement

**EXAMPLE:** When staff notices children bunching up together, she says, “Take a minute to scoot back so that everyone can see. Look around and be sure everyone has room.”

**EXAMPLE:** Before reading, staff puts on a fox-ear cap and one mitten. She says, “We are going to read a book about a boy who drops his mitten. What happens when we drop a mitten?” Children respond, “Sometimes it gets lost.” “My momma finds it.” “It gets dirty.”

A child asks, “Where is your other mitten?” Staff responds, “Here it is! It was behind me.” Staff says, “Let’s find out what happens to Nicki’s mitten when it gets dropped in the snow.” When she is finished, she asks, “What animals in the book tried on Nicki’s mitten?” (This staff relates book content to children’s experience.)

**EXAMPLE:** During book reading, children are seated in a circle around staff. Staff holds the book outward and moves it slowly in a sweep, so that all of the children have time to focus on the illustration. When children are restless, staff takes a break and leads a chant with a predictable rhyme that matches the book theme. (This staff is sensitive to children’s need for a shorter reading time, and knows the children need to be actively engaged.)

### Showing interest and enjoyment in books

**EXAMPLE:** Staff says, “Oh this is my favorite author! Robert McCloskey wrote the words and drew the illustrations. He wrote *One Morning in Maine*, *Make Way for Ducklings*, and *Blueberries for Sal*. We can see Sal in the kitchen making blueberry jam. What else do you see in this picture?” (This staff shows interest and enjoyment through positive expression and personal connection with the book.)

### Using accommodations with books

**EXAMPLE:** During reading time, a child is briefly restless. Staff offers a stuffed animal that matches the theme of the book for the child to hold, and sits next to the child. Another child with visual needs is given an individual copy of the book to hold.

**EXAMPLE:** During book-reading time, staff introduces new vocabulary in both English and Spanish for dual language learners. When staff encounters the new vocabulary words in the story, she again repeats the words both Spanish and English.

### Participating actively in reading=

**EXAMPLE:** Staff reads books with active rhyming patterns. During *Chica Chica Boom Boom*, children are enthusiastic as they join in reciting the words. As part of book reading, children eagerly place letters on a large felt tree.

**EXAMPLE:** Staff reads *We’re Going on a Bear Hunt*. Staff animates the chant and rubs hands together. “Oh no! We can’t go over it!” The children respond by rubbing their hands and repeating, “We can’t go

over it.” Staff continues, “We can’t go under it.” The children repeat, “Can’t go under it.” All make the “swishy-swashy” sounds together with their mouths and hands.

### Showing interest and enjoyment in books

**EXAMPLE:** Two children choose a book from the shelf. Staff asks, “What book did you choose?” The child respond, “It’s about bears.” Staff says, “Let’s look at the book together and see what the bears are doing. What do you see the bears doing in the cover picture?”

### Relating books to themes

**EXAMPLE:** A basket is prepared with books about seasons. Several “autumn” books are displayed on the top of the low shelf in the reading center. Staff encourages children to find leaves in the book that match leaves in the wooden bowl that the children have collected.

### Using books informally

**EXAMPLE:** A basket of books about owls is next to a stuffed owl display. Staff encourages children to point to their favorite owl in the book. She asks them to tell what they like about the way their chosen owl looks, moves, or flies.

**EXAMPLE:** Staff looks with children at a recipe picture book stored on a low shelf next to the housekeeping area. “I’m hungry. What do you think we can make for lunch? Is there a recipe that looks good to you?” The children respond, “I want to make tacos. I want to make pancakes.” Staff helps the children find the pages with pictures to match their menu choices.

**EXAMPLE:** Staff notices a child reading. “I see you are reading The 12 Days of Kindergarten.” Child responds, “I am going to kindergarten soon.” Staff says, “In the fall, you will go to kindergarten. Would you like to read the book with me?” The child responds, “Yes.” Staff asks, “What is the boy on the cover saying to his mother?”

### Using books to answer questions

**EXAMPLE:** A child says, “I am trying to build a house, but I need some tools.” Staff responds, “Let’s see what tools you will need to build a house.” She sits next to three children and introduces Building a

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House, by Byron Barton. “Let’s make a list of tools the builders need and see if you can get some good building ideas.”

**EXAMPLE:** A child shows staff a stuffed animal. “I have a raccoon.” Staff responds, “I think that is an opossum. Let’s take a look at There’s an Opossum in My Backyard to see what makes an opossum special.” Two children join them as staff points to the book cover. She asks, “What do you notice about the opossum in the tree? Is your stuffed animal similar or different?”