

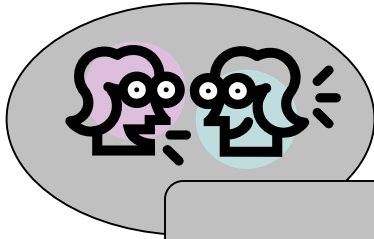
# **TALK PARTNERS:**

## **A guidance booklet for schools**

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## Talk Partners

This guidance document has been produced by a working group of advisers and consultants - our very grateful thanks to all who have contributed. This is still a live document and suggestions for improvement are welcomed. We aimed to produce guidance for schools, to inform practice and to contribute to the overall improvement of Assessment for Learning.

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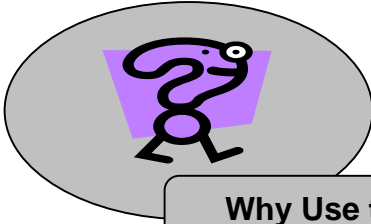
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***With thanks to the children of Chorley St Mary's RC Primary School for the front cover design.***



## Why Use the Strategy of Talk Partners?

*'Talk is an important means by which we communicate and build social relationships, and it plays a crucial role in learning'* (Primary National Strategy)

In any lesson it is important that all children are fully involved in the learning activities if they are to make the best progress. Teachers usually have a question and response session as part of a lesson; whilst this provides the opportunity for individual children to respond to the teacher, the use of 'talk partners' as a strategy means that all children get the opportunity to think, discuss and express themselves orally.

Some children may feel more confident when expressing their ideas in a paired situation, rather than to the whole class, when the fear of getting a question wrong may actually restrict their learning; the shared responsibility for an opinion or view which comes with this strategy can raise children's self-confidence and encourage their engagement. It also gives the teacher more opportunities to ask higher order questions which require more thought, reflection and exploration, and it gives children time to think. There is significant research to show that children's learning is restricted by low level questioning and lack of time to respond; the use of talk partners can really take children's learning on further, and what's more, it's fun.

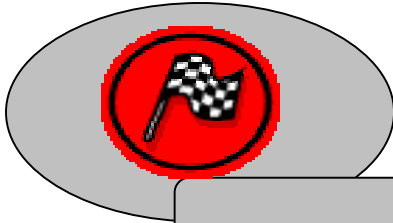
All research shows that when speaking and listening is well developed and encouraged it has a positive impact on children's learning. So what is "Talk Partners"?

One simple strategy that many teachers already use is 'think, pair, and share'. Here children are provided with the task and with time to think before they discuss it with a partner followed by a paired discussion; the results of the discussion are then shared with a wider audience, such as the whole class. Teachers may have used this type of approach without the tag of "Talk Partners". The following brief guidance aims to indicate how this could be used on a more regular, planned basis, and builds on research about what really works.

Some of the positive outcomes of using the talk partner's approach are that it:

- provides an opportunity for all children to speak and listen to each other;
- helps children to generate ideas, views and opinions safely;
- provides the opportunity for all children to voice their understanding of ideas, concepts, vocabulary and linguistic conventions;
- enables participation by children who might not be as confident in the whole class situation;
- helps in the rehearsal of words and phrases before committing them to paper or contributing to a larger audience;
- develops thinking, speaking, listening, collaborative and cooperative skills;
- ensures all children are involved in the lesson;
- encourages the involvement of boys;
- enables children to learn from each other;
- provides thinking time;
- encourages extended responses;
- develops coherent thinking;
- develops 'process talk' (thinking through talk);
- provides opportunities for adults to observe, listen to and assess children's understanding.





## Getting Started

The successful use of this strategy doesn't just happen. The approach needs to be introduced with some careful preparation and planning. The teacher needs to think through which type of lesson would be best suited for them to introduce the talk partners, decide how they are going to partner children together, and give guidance to children on what is expected. The guidance needs to be talked through with the class, perhaps with the teacher and children designing some ground rules together.

Some teachers have found it useful to demonstrate the strategy themselves, either with a child, or with another adult. This model is quite successful, both in introducing the approach, and in extending it further. For example, once talk partners as an approach is starting to be established, the teacher may want to illustrate to the children how best to question their partner in order to encourage them in a positive way. Teachers could demonstrate ways of doing this in front of the class. When introducing the talk partners approach teachers can:

- identify opportunities for using talk partners at the planning stage;
- start with a topic that lends itself to the use of the open questions such as, Who? What? Where? When? Why?;
- think about the dynamics of the class and how to **pair** the children;
- establish speaking and listening **ground rules** with the children;
- model **speaking courtesies** (such as how to start and how to respond), vocabulary that might be used, and the type of **questions** that partners could use;
- build up the talk partners' skills in small steps;
- be prepared for unexpected avenues that may enhance the quality of the talk.





## Pairings

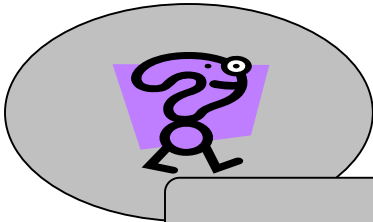
Teachers need to decide how they are going to pair children initially, and for how long. There are many ways of doing this, for example by similar ability, mixed ability, friendship, same gender, same first language etc. However, all research shows that paired response work such as this works best when the pairing is **absolutely random**, and is seen by the children as being so.

Random pairings tend to be seen as fairer by children and if the pairings are changed regularly, children get the opportunity to talk to children that they might not normally have interaction with on an extended basis. This might be something teachers could try out and experiment with over time. Certainly it pays off if pairings are changed, say every two/four weeks.

There really are no rules on this; it's what works best for the teacher and their class! There are lots of interesting and fun ways of getting those random pairings that teachers can use, for example;

- by the drawing of names out of a hat;
- drawing of same numbered lolly sticks out of a hat;
- using dice (one child throws a number, children take turns to throw and see who pairs the first number; works best on tables of pupils)





## Use of questioning

Good questioning can maximise the potential of a learning opportunity and generate higher level thinking and discussion. The best questions are open-ended and give children scope for a variety of answers. If there is no right or wrong answer, but different interpretations of the issue, it raises children's confidence and level of engagement and participation. Asking children how they arrived at their ideas or answers further extends the learning opportunities.

When using the talk partners approach, teachers can shape the learning by using a variety of question types, leaning towards more open and challenging questions than they might normally have time for when questioning children as part of the whole class question/answer scenario mentioned earlier. Questions could be thought of in these ways;

**Literal question;** a question requiring an answer that is a fact: "What happened in the story?"

**Inferential;** a question where the children have to think, perhaps using clues, and explore possibilities through their talk: "Why did x run away?"

**Evaluative;** a question where children's own experiences, opinions and perspective influence their answers: "What do you think of the story? Is it a good one and why?"

**Synthesis;** a question that allows children to pull their ideas together: "Can you think of a different/better ending? Why is it better?"

Teachers can plan higher order questions which challenge children to think very profitably in all subjects. When using the talk partners approach the teacher may give time to a pair to talk about one question, or several questions that link together. They may start with a literal one to "get them going" then move onto a higher order question which really engages them in some discussion and debate. The talk time needs to be time limited, with children aware of the timings (say 5 minutes) and the teacher keeping to it.

It is also helpful if children are aware of how the teacher is planning to take feedback from each pair; for example, it is not always possible to hear what each pair thinks in a feedback to a whole class (it would take too much time and perhaps become repetitive), so if the teacher indicates s/he is intending to allow 5 minutes for this task and then will choose 3 groups to feedback, it makes it clear for everyone.

Questions can be usefully displayed on whiteboards, flipcharts and on cards given to individual pairs. In fact there is no reason why all the pairs have to explore the same questions at all times; it is interesting some times to use a variety of questions around the pairings.

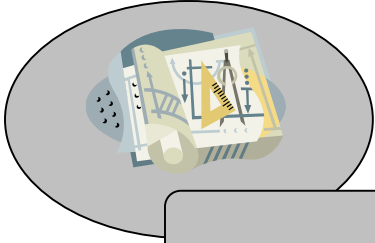
## Some question prompts/starters

There are many different ways of analysing questions. The talk partner approach allows an emphasis to be made on higher order questions that require more thought. The following may be useful in suggesting starting points or prompts for children, and can be displayed in the classroom for easy reference, given to pairs on cards etc.

<p><b><u>Mainly literal:</u></b>            How many . . . ?            Where is . . . ?            In which year did..?            Which of these go together? Why?            How are these things alike/similar/different?            What are the characteristics of all the things in this group?            What criteria have been used to classify these?            How could you rearrange . . . ?            How could you compare . . . and . . . ?            What is . . . doing?            What can you see when you look carefully?            What did you notice about . . . ?            What words could you use to describe. . ?            What is true about all of these?</p>	<p><b><u>Mainly inferential:</u></b>            Do you think this is a good/bad thing?            Do you agree with this? Why?            Why was this done? Do you think it was a good idea?            Why does . . . ?            How do you . . . ?            Why did this happen . . . ?            What caused this?            Why do you think they did this?</p>
<p><b><u>Mainly Evaluative:</u></b>            How do you feel about this? Why?            Why do you think that . . . ?            What might be the result of . . . ?            Why do you think so?            Can you think of another explanation?            What do you think might be happening here? Why?            How do you imagine they are feeling?</p>	<p><b><u>Mainly synthesis:</u></b>            Is there anything you would have done differently? Why?            What would/might happen if . . . ?            If . . . , what do you think will be the result?            What would it be like if . . . ?            What would you do if . . . ?            Can anyone think of a different idea for...?            What is your opinion on...?            What would this character think about....? (possibly use a current up to date issue)</p>

The teacher's role during the talk partnered sessions is to keep everyone on task and to circulate the pairs encouraging, modelling good listening, assessing children's level of understanding and at times adding to the discussion; they just need to resist the urge to take over!





## Ground Rules

It is important that the teacher establishes and maintains the ground rules for the talk partner sessions. This seems to work best when children are involved in putting the ground rules together; they are displayed and referred to by the teacher regularly, with praise given to children who keep to them without reminders; and when they are revisited by the teacher and class to see if they are still appropriate or need extending.

One class and their teacher discussed and put together some guidance on how to be a successful talk partner, with some ideas on what NOT to do. These were displayed and referred to regularly by the adults and children in the classroom. These ideas are reproduced below. Teachers may be able to use and adapt these ideas, and make them age appropriate for their class:

### How to be a successful talk partner : Do:

1. Look at your partner when they are talking.
2. Look interested.
3. Don't let other things distract you.
4. Let your partner express their views.
5. Think carefully about what your partner is saying.
6. Stay focused on the question/task.
7. Try to be clear about what you mean.
8. Say more than one or two words.
9. Be prepared to agree to try and persuade, and sometimes be prepared to agree to disagree.

When you are a talk partner, Don't:

1. avoid all eye contact
2. look bored
3. fidget.
4. interrupt all the time.
5. act as though you aren't listening to what they're saying.
6. just say only one or two words.
7. let your partner do all the work.
8. encourage your partner to go off task.
9. make your partner accept your ideas if they don't agree.

**Another school designed a poster with response starters:**

Ideas for ways to respond to your partner:

**I think that.....**

**It seems to me that.....**

**I would have preferred it if.....**

**Don't you think it would have been better if.....**

**This makes it seem.....**

**Perhaps a better way would have been.....**

**I think.....because**

**I disagree with that because.....**

**What do you think?**

## **Examples of how talk partners might be used**

The following is **one idea** on how to structure a talk partner session:

**Introduction** of topic by the teacher with an overview of aspects to be discussed

**Sharing of ideas** by the whole class, led by the teacher, building upon previous experience

**Reminder by the teacher of the ground rules and any talk planner** used to scaffold the work (this could include modelling by the teacher, display of questions, reference to display of ground rules)

**Talk partner work** (with teacher circulating pairs to observe/assess/encourage etc)

**Feedback from some of the pairs** (led by the teacher who draws out good points about topic questions, and about how the pair engaged with task)

**Summarising** of points made and conclusion

This session can be as short or as long as the teacher finds appropriate. It may also be led by a classroom assistant.

### **Some other ideas:**

**Split Images:** An activity which involves children taking turns to describe illustrations in a text to a partner.

Outcome: Interpret the whole text from the illustrations.

- ❖ Organise children into talk partners;
- ❖ Children take turns to describe an illustration to his/her partner who cannot see the illustration.
- ❖ The describer can include predictions about what may be coming next in the text
- ❖ The other partner then describes the next picture and can build upon the predictions made by the first child.
- ❖ The children alternate to describe each illustration until the book is completed.

The teacher can then ask partners to describe their interpretations of the whole text to each other and/or the group/class.

**Check the text:** An activity that helps children to use pictures, photographs, diagrams or illustrations to make predictions about a text.

Outcome: To compare own predictions with an actual text.

- ❖ The children are provided with a piece of writing with the text covered up. They can only see the pictures, photographs or diagrams.
- ❖ The children look at and discuss the illustrations.
- ❖ They discuss and create a text that matches their interpretation of the illustrations in pairs.

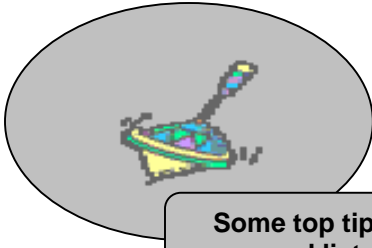
They compare their interpretation with the actual text, discussing similarities and differences.

**Crystal Ball:** An activity to help children to use explicit and implicit information to speculate about the future of a main character.

Outcome: A speculation about the future of a main character.

- ❖ After reading a text, create talk partners.
- ❖ Allocate each pair with a character from the text.
- ❖ Ask talk partners to share important information about the character's likes, dislikes, interests or personality (explicit or implied)
- ❖ Ask talk partners to predict/create a future for the character, e.g. where they are, what they are doing, who they are with.
- ❖ Share prediction with justifications.





**Some top tips for developing children's speaking and listening skills through talk partners**

*'Language is an integral part of most learning and oral language in particular has a key role in classroom teaching and learning. Children's creativity, understanding and imagination can be engaged and fostered by discussion and interaction.'* (Speaking, Listening, Learning: working with children in Key Stages 1 and 2, QCA, 2003)

For Talk Partners to be effective and aid children's learning, it is important that adults actively develop children's confidence in speaking and that they specifically plan to teach/assess children's speaking and listening skills.

**Skills for children:**

In order to develop children's listening skills, it is important to encourage them to focus on lots of quite demanding skills. Not all of these will be developed straight away with each child. They will need plenty of discussion to pull out what is successful and effective, and skill development will probably work better if modelled by the teacher/classroom assistant on a regular basis. The teacher could focus on one area from the suggestions below and explore this with a class for some time, before moving on to another skill;

- making appropriate eye contact with the listener. This might need explaining to children and demonstrating. It doesn't necessarily mean staring at someone without looking away - in fact this can be quite off putting!;
- speaking clearly and audibly;
- giving a partner time to think before they respond to questions;
- using facial expression and gestures to emphasise points;
- using precise and persuasive words to convey meaning and hold the listener's attention;
- making meanings clear,
- organising ideas in a helpful order and making links between them;
- responding to a partner's contributions by adding or elaborating on them or by putting across another view.

### **Things for the teacher to remember include the need to:**

- give a purpose for listening in advance;
- present material clearly with prompts on display to support listening ;
- ensure that children are expected to provide extended answers that will interest their partner and others in the class;
- be ready to follow up children's contributions with further questions rather than repetition or ritual praise;
- aim to choose topics that will challenge children cognitively;
- expect children to speak to their partner, group or class, not just to the teacher;
- encourage children speak loudly and clearly so others can hear.

The teacher can further encourage active and responsive listening by demonstrating active listening strategies to the class. These might include the use of eye contact, how to ask questions and how to do a quick recap of ideas. The teacher can also help the children to identify the features of language, gesture and non-verbal cues which help the listener to stay interested. As part of this process they can ask the children to reflect on how they listened to their partner, and how they could do better next time. The teacher could, when other skills are developed, move children on to further strategies to structure listening such as the use of physical responses (e.g. gestures) to mark key points, how to form mental pictures to enable them to remember key points and how to think of a good question to ask.

### **Teachers can make the skill of active listening really important in the classroom by:**

- avoiding repeating what children say
- expecting others to respond;
- devising tasks which require all children to contribute what they know;
- not repeating instructions;
- sometimes speaking quietly;
- insisting children respond to the last speaker;
- ensuring children answer the question they are asked;
- encouraging children to speak audibly.

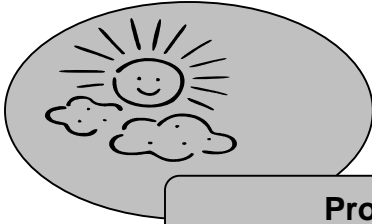


### The role of the teaching assistant in developing talk partners

Teaching Assistants can play a vital role in supporting and developing children's speaking and listening skills so that the use of Talk Partners impacts positively on learning. The Primary Strategy Standards Site ([www.standards.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk)) has lots of ideas for strategies which teaching assistants might use during lessons. Some of the ideas are included here. Teaching assistants can;

- encourage discussion and good listening by drawing in reticent children e.g. "I think Jamie has an idea....."
- start the ball rolling when children are slow to contribute, e.g. "How about we think about....." or " I think we were talking about one of those the other day....."
- give silent yet supportive encouragement towards less able or less confident children, by drawing them in to the discussion - by nodding, smiling, eye contact etc;
- make appropriate contributions - as long as it doesn't pre-empt the children's responses;
- echo the teacher by repeating, rewarding or refining teaching points, e.g. repeating or rephrasing instructions for children who are slow to respond:





## Professional Development

*“What is needed is a plan.....in which a few small groups are supported....they then form a basis of experience and expertise for disseminating within the school and supporting colleagues in making similar explorations for themselves”*

Black and Wiliam, 2003

Research and feedback from schools indicates that the best way to introduce a new approach is to involve several keen members of staff to trial the approach first, and then introduce this across the whole school. Whilst one member of staff can trial the approaches, it is usually better if at least two “have a go”; they can discuss the process as it is going along, and enthuse each other!

### **To get started:**

This small group of teachers could:

- Make and follow a plan, perhaps using the ideas mentioned in this document, about how they can introduce and trial the Talk Partners approach with their classes. They need to plan for time to liaise with each other to see how it is going, what works well, and what could be adapted. Support from the Senior Leadership Team will of course make this process all the more effective;
- They could look out for relevant in-service courses which would provide ideas and support in trialling the approach, and/or seek external guidance and support from a consultant/teacher adviser/school adviser, after liaison with the Senior Leadership Team in school;
- They could link up with other local schools which either have effectively trialled and introduced the approach across the whole school, to “pick their brains” on how best to introduce the process, or link up with schools which are starting a small scale trial. The school adviser might be able to recommend some schools in this position;
- They could read up on relevant ideas, for example looking at some of the Shirley Clarke publications which bring in Talk Partners (e.g. *“Formative Assessment in Action, Weaving the Elements Together”*, Shirley Clarke, Hodder Murray, 2005).

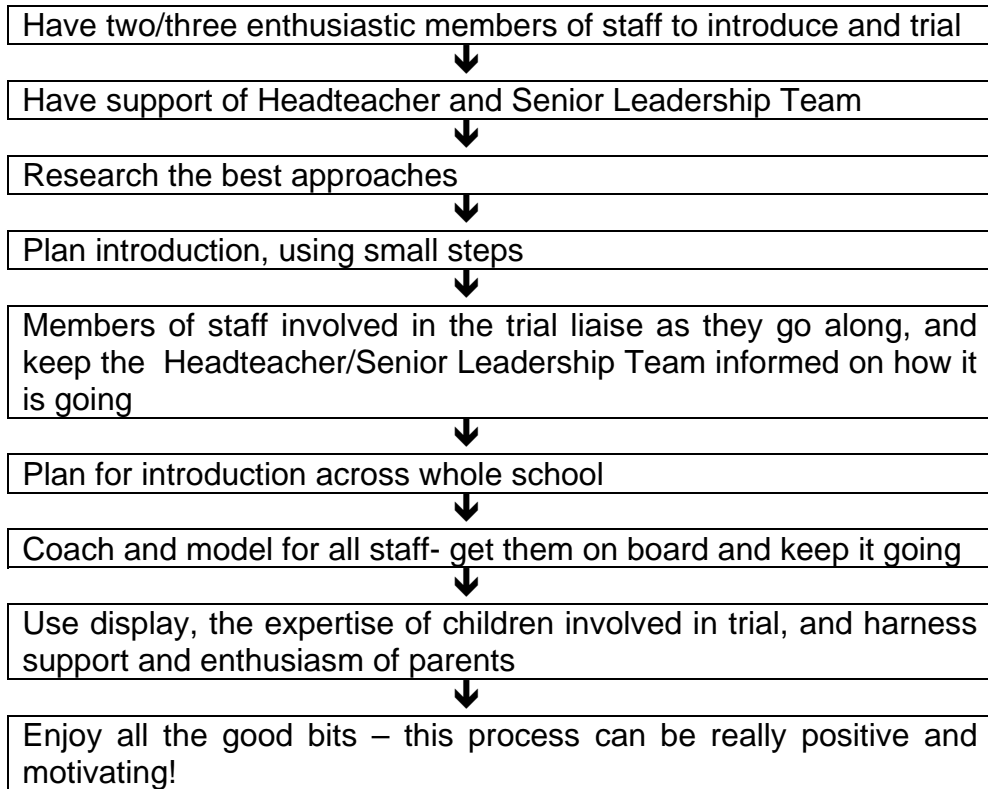


## **Taking it across the whole school:**

Having trialled the approach, this small group of teachers needs to work with the Headteacher and the Senior Leadership Team to plan how this could best be disseminated across the whole school. This will have to fit in with other planned development priorities, and schools' methods of disseminating will be many and varied dependent of on their situation. However, some schools have found the following ideas to be useful:

- A whole school staff meeting, led by the two/three teachers who trialled the approach, setting out the advantages, giving guidance on introducing with a class, explaining some of the pitfalls they came across and how to get round these, and planning with teachers the next steps in the whole school approach;
- The teachers involved in trialling could work with other members of staff on a one to one basis to help them introduce in their classes;
- A class of children involved in the trial could help introduce the approach to other children in school. One school has successfully used this idea, by setting up workshops led and organised by the Year 6 children in the hall. They produced some displays and each child partnered with a child from another class to "talk them through the talk partner " process;
- Displays around the school can help to flag up the key messages about talk partners and keep the approach high profile;
- The Headteacher, Senior Leadership Team and teachers involved in the trial can encourage and coach other members of staff. Reminders in staff meetings and sharing of good practice, discussion about "what works/what doesn't" helps to keep it going!
- Parents can be involved too, and can keep the motivation for success high. Some schools put on a parents' workshop to explain the approach. Other schools use a leaflet to explain how parents can help.

**Key elements of professional development and introduction of talk partners:**



## **Further reading**

Case studies are available on some sites e.g.

[www.bteducation.org/awards/casestudy05.ikml?id=1260](http://www.bteducation.org/awards/casestudy05.ikml?id=1260)

Formative Assessment in Action, Weaving the Elements Together, Shirley Clarke, Hodder Murray, 2005).

Speaking, Listening, Learning: working with children in Key Stages 1 and 2, QCA, 2003

The Primary Strategy Standards Site ([www.standards.dfes.gov.uk](http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk))

Many schools and teachers will be familiar with the Assessment for Learning materials which are included in the DfES Primary Strategy materials published in 2004; these contain a wealth of guidance and information, to be used and adapted in school. Telephone orders from the DfES 0845 60 222 60, email at [dfes@prolog.uk.com](mailto:dfes@prolog.uk.com).  
References are:

- *Excellence and Enjoyment: learning and teaching in the primary years, introductory guides on continuing professional development and on supporting school improvement* (this pack contains two red booklets and a CDROM with a self evaluation grid). The reference is DfES 0344-2004 G;
- *Excellence and Enjoyment: learning and teaching in the primary years, professional development materials* (this is a box containing further booklets and videos). The reference for this is DfES 0518-2004 G.