

Especially for practitioners working with preschoolers! 

Listen To Me

Talking and Listening

“Private speech” is the kind of talking aloud children (and adults) do when they talk to themselves. An adult using private speech might ask himself or herself aloud, “Where did I leave my keys?” Private speech is an important part of language and learning development for preschoolers. It helps them practice unfamiliar kinds of language and reinforces ideas that they are trying to remember.

What is the practice?

You can encourage the preschoolers in your classroom to use private speech by expressing interest (“It sounds like the toys are having a really exciting conversation! Can you tell me what they’re talking about?”) and by suggesting its uses (“Sometimes when I’m really mad I count to ten out loud until I’m calmer. Let’s try that now.”).



What does the practice look like?

Just like adults, preschoolers can use private speech to calm down when they are upset or to remember the steps of a task that is still unfamiliar. You may hear a preschool child talking to himself while playing alone in a classroom center, making up a story or dialogue for a stuffed animal or other toys. If he is eager to have you or another child in the class join his play, you can ask him to share what the toys are talking about. You may hear a preschooler in your class muttering angrily to himself when he is frustrated, or reciting the “rules” of a particular task when he is trying to do something new. You can encourage this by suggesting he “use words” (“It’s okay to be mad and say you’re mad; that’s why we use our words”) and think through what he’s trying to do (“I can see you want to build that tower by yourself. Where should you put the next block?”).

How do you do the practice?

There are many everyday ways you can encourage private speech depending on the context and for what the children in your preschool class are using it. Private speech is particularly useful for many children in understanding and controlling their emotions and helping them calm down.

- Modeling private speech is one way to encourage preschool children. If you forget where you put something, for example, you might say something like, “Let’s see, we came in from the playground and then I walked over to the sink to wash my hands...” This demonstrates for the children your thought process and the way that you verbalize it to help yourself remember.
- Offer suggestions of what you might tell yourself when you are having trouble with something. For example, if a child is frustrated trying to get his coat buttoned, you can help him “talk it through”: “Sometimes when I’m trying to do something hard I start feeling mad, but then I try to slow down, take some deep breaths, and tell myself what I need to do first. What could you do to get the button in the hole more easily?”
- Praise the children when you see them using private speech: “It wasn’t easy to get all those pieces back in the box, but I heard you say ‘First the red ones, then the blue ones.’ That was a great way to help remind yourself how to do it!”
- Encourage the playful use of private speech by asking what the toys are “thinking” or “saying” when you see children in the class playing alone: “That looks like a really fun game those toys are playing. Can you tell me what this one is thinking?” This helps the preschoolers experiment with different kinds of speech, building their vocabulary and fluency.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Do the children in your preschool class use private speech while playing alone?
- Can the preschoolers use private speech to help calm themselves?
- Do the preschoolers try to remember the steps to a task by “talking it through”?

Take a look at more “private speech”

Talking Away a Worry



Preschool teacher Ms. Patricia notices 4-year-old Maya playing by herself in the classroom’s kitchen area. She has a doll and a stuffed animal and is talking with great animation. Ms. Patricia goes closer and overhears Maya talking in a “grown up” voice for the doll, saying “and I will come right back home.” Ms. Patricia remembers that Maya’s mother mentioned she is going out of town on a business trip. She approaches and picks up the stuffed animal. “I think this little bear’s worried because his mom is going away for a few days.” Maya nods and says, “But she says she’ll be back soon.” “What does the bear think about that?” Ms. Patricia asks. Maya shrugs. “Why don’t you help him talk about it with his mom?” She pretends to make the bear talk aloud to the “mom” doll, then she lets Maya take over and finish the conversation. Soon she sees Maya smiling as she joins the other kids in play.

Best Buddies

Four-year-old James is best buddies with Reggie at preschool. One day Reggie is absent and James keeps to himself during free time, seeming lost as to what to do. To encourage James to get involved in a fun activity of his choice, his teacher reminds him of fun things that he and Reggie do when they are together. “You can build a zoo for the animals,” she suggests to him. “Remember when you and Reggie did that and the animals all moved in?” The teacher gets a toy lion and makes it “talk” about needing a safe new zoo so it will not be tempted to gobble up people. James laughs, and a little while later his teacher overhears James “talking” for each animal as he uses blocks to build their new homes. When another child in the class finishes a game, she helps the child ask James if he can join in, and James tells him about all the zoo buildings he is making.



Transition Talk



Four-and-a-half-year-old Maria has difficulty transitioning from one activity to another when she’s at preschool and gets anxious and angry at these times. Her teacher has encouraged her to talk to herself out loud when it is time to switch activities, to help her remember what is coming next. They have a special day planned with a trip to the zoo, so during morning circle time, her preschool teacher asks the class: “Remember what we’re going to do today? First we’ll get on the van and then...” She calls on Maria and waits patiently for her to complete the sentence “Then we are going to drive to the zoo!” Maria says, remembering. “Then what will we do?” the teacher asks her. “Then we will get out and see the animals.” “That’s right!” the teacher tells her. “And class, if anyone feels mad or worried, what should they do?” “Count to ten,” one of the other children says. “Not hit or yell” adds Maria, “just use our words or do our counts.” “You’re right,” her teacher replies, “We’re going to have a really fun day.” The teacher knows this line of discussion helps Maria, because she hears Maria counting or talking quietly to herself when she gets frustrated, instead of hitting the way she did in the past.