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## The development of conversation skills in toddlers

Although the bulk of the research on children's language development focuses on vocabulary and grammar acquisition, competent language users know how to engage in conversation as well. Despite the fact that producing and comprehending conversations is a critical social and linguistic skill, very little is known about how children develop conversational structure. In the present study, we examine conversations between mothers and their toddlers to explore how this skill emerges. As part of a larger study, 16 mother-child dyads participated in a ten-minute free-play session when the children were 20 months old and again when they were 30 months old. These free play sessions were then transcribed and a coding scheme was developed to mark every utterance for (1) whether the mother or the child made the utterance; (2) whether the utterance initiated, shifted, or maintained a topic; and (3) whether the speaker was responding to a partner's utterance (turn-taking) or followed up on his/her own utterance. Our findings indicate that mothers model how to begin a conversation. Mothers control the topic of conversation, particularly at 20 months. They initiate 65% of the topics when children are 20 months old and 58% when they are 30 months old. They are also more likely to shift a topic to a related subject (mothers make 71% of topic shifts at 20 months and 58% at 30 months). Mothers also model how to make contingent responses: When the child does not respond to the mother's comment, the mother makes an appropriate response herself. When the children are 20 months old, 50% of the mothers' utterances are follow-ups to their own prior utterances (45% at 30 months). Children gain conversational competence gradually. They take more turns in conversation with age, producing 29% of the utterances at 20 months and 36% at 30 months, mainly due to an increased number of contingent responses to the mother's utterances. They also initiate more topics with age (35% at 20 months, 42% at 30 months) and are more likely to shift topics to a related subjects (29% at 20 months, 42% at 30 months). Thus, mothers appear to model the structure of conversation by introducing topics and providing contingent responses to their own turns when the child is unable to. We hypothesize that as children's vocabulary and grammatical skills develop, they will become more active partners by initiating more topics and making contingent responses. This skill begins to emerge by 20 months of age in normally developing children.