



# The Power of Student Conversation

*“By giving our students practice in talking with others,  
we give them frames for thinking on their own.”*

—LEV VYGOTSKY

**W**hile I was observing a third grade class recently, a lively conversation captured my attention. The students were discussing Thomas Rockwell’s book *How to Eat Fried Worms*. In the book, two boys, Alan and Joe, bet another, Billy, that he won’t be able to eat fifteen worms in fifteen days. When it appears that Billy will accomplish this feat, the boys resort to trickery to try and stop him. After reading aloud one of these tricks, the teacher paused and asked a seemingly simple question, “Is tricking someone cheating?”

At first, many students, clearly empathizing with Billy, thought the other boys’ tricks definitely constituted cheating. They laid out a strong case that by resorting to sneaky tactics, Alan and Joe were being unfair and dishonest. Then, one student wondered aloud if what Alan and Joe did was similar to “the special moves I do in soccer that help me get past the other team. Those moves are kind of tricks, but they’re not against the rules. So they aren’t cheating.”

His classmates were silent for a moment as they considered this new viewpoint. Another student spoke up and said, “I agree with you part of the way. I think soccer

can help us figure this out. But, I'm wondering, is what they did more like what you're saying or more like an illegal soccer move?" The teacher let the class wrestle with these ideas a bit longer before moving on to the next point of discussion.

It was clear to me that this conversation helped the children better understand the book's characters. But after further reflection, I realized that it also gave them meaningful practice with the critical speaking and thinking skills they would need to analyze and discuss more complex texts and real-life situations. This book is designed to help you teach your students these types of skills—the ones they'll need to have for the same kinds of challenging, thought-provoking academic conversations.

The teaching techniques described in this book are based on the *Responsive Classroom* approach to teaching and learning. Since its inception in 1981, *Responsive Classroom* has recognized the importance of teaching children listening, speaking, and thinking skills—and has been giving teachers tools for explicitly doing that teaching. Numerous other national organizations and initiatives have also come to recognize the importance of explicitly teaching speaking and listening:

- The Common Core State Standards include speaking and listening skills as critical skills students must learn to be college- and career-ready.
- The Partnership for 21st Century Skills has similarly recognized the importance of academic communication skills to students' future success.
- The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), National Science Teachers Association (NSTA), and National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS) all emphasize communication skills as critical for success in their content areas.

These and numerous other initiatives and organizations recognize that students who can listen deeply, reflect on what others are saying, express their ideas clearly and persuasively, ask insightful questions, and debate respectfully will be more successful in school and outside of school—and be more likely to grow into thoughtful, caring citizens.

Of course, students don't enter the classroom knowing all the ins and outs of how to hold productive conversations. They need to be taught specifically how to make their talk:

→ **Clear and coherent**—expressing ideas in ways that are to the point and easy for their classmates to understand.

→ **Purposeful**—coming to conversations prepared, thinking before speaking, and having a clear purpose when speaking, such as to assert a different opinion, ask a question, or clarify understanding.



→ **Well-reasoned**—supporting their assertions and opinions with relevant reasons, facts, and other evidence.

→ **Conveying curiosity and open-mindedness**—listening with genuine interest to others' ideas and thoughtfully considering a wide range of perspectives.

→ **Respectful**—speaking and listening in ways that always show consideration for others.

This book offers you practical techniques for teaching children how to have academic conversations that reflect all of these characteristics. It also gives you ideas for seamlessly integrating this teaching into your regular curriculum.

You'll walk away with a roadmap for teaching children the essentials of speaking and listening—and for stimulating powerful classroom conversations that put every student on the path to academic success.

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Note: In this book, for ease of reading, the term “parent” is used to represent all the caregivers involved in a child's life.



# Listening Essentials

## Quiet, Focused, Comprehending

**S**uccessful academic conversations begin with listening. To engage in productive talk with classmates, students must first hear and understand what another person says. Children need to learn all aspects of listening—from quieting themselves and giving their full attention to the speaker, to paraphrasing and summarizing to make sure they understood what was said, and all the critical steps in between.

Being a capable listener has far-reaching benefits. Students who listen well can learn more from their teachers and develop stronger relationships with their classmates and others. Picture this typical scene from a third grade classroom as students investigate different ways to solve double-digit multiplication problems.

**Cheri describes how she tried to solve the problem  $14 \times 23$ :** “I broke up the first number. I multiplied 10 times 23 and got 230. Then, I tried  $4 \times 23$ , but that was kind of hard for me. So, I did  $4 \times 20$ , which is 80, and  $4 \times 3$ , which is 12. But then I got confused and time was up. I could use everyone’s help now.”