

Especially for parents of preschoolers! 

Who's Listening?

 Talking and Listening

“Private speech” is to the kind of talking children (and adults) do when they talk to themselves. You are using private speech when you ask aloud, “What did I come to the kitchen for?” Or, “Where did I leave my keys?” Private speech is an important part of preschoolers’ language development. It helps them practice unfamiliar kinds of language and reinforces ideas they are trying to remember.

What is the practice?

You can encourage your child’s use of private speech by expressing interest. “It sounds like you and your toys are having a really exciting conversation! Can you tell me what they’re talking about?” You can also suggest ways to use it. “Some times when I’m really mad I count to 10 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 they can use it to remember the steps of a new task. You may hear your child talking to himself while playing alone—making up a story or dialogue for his toys. If he wants you to join his play, ask him to tell you what everyone is talking about. You may hear your preschooler muttering angrily to himself when he is frustrated. You may hear him reciting the steps of a particular task when he is trying to do something new. You can encourage private speech by talking about good times to “use words.” “It’s okay to be mad and say you’re mad. That’s why we use our words.” Also encourage private speech to think through what he’s trying to do. “I can see you want to get dressed by yourself. What’s the first thing you need to do?”

How do you do the practice?

There are many ways to encourage private speech as part of your preschooler’s everyday activities:

- Model private speech for your child. If you forget where you put your car keys, for example, you might say something like, “Let’s see. We came in from the car and the phone was ringing. But my keys aren’t by the phone. Then I walked over to the sink to wash my hands...” Your preschooler hears what you’re thinking and how putting thoughts into words can help with memory.
- Suggest what you might tell yourself when you’re upset or having trouble with something. For example, if you see that your child is frustrated trying to get his shoes on, help him “talk it through.” “Some times when I’m trying to do something hard I start feeling mad. But then I try to slow down. I take some deep breaths and tell myself what I need to do first. What could you do first to get your shoe on more easily?”
- Praise your child when you see him using private speech. “I know it was hard 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 remind yourself how to do it!”
- Encourage your child to use private speech during play. Ask what his toys are “thinking” or “saying” when he’s playing alone.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Does your preschooler use private speech while playing alone?
- Can your preschooler help calm himself down with private speech?
- Does your preschooler try to remember the steps to a task by “talking it through” to himself?

Take a look at more “private speech”

First-Day Pe p Tà lk

Jared will start kindergarten next week. He feels excited but nervous. He’s not sure he likes the idea of moving on from preschool. After Jared sees his classroom for the first time, Dad can see Jared is nervous. When they return home, Dad suggests, “Why don’t you pretend it’s your first day? You can get out your brother’s old school books and play school just how you want it to be.” Jared likes this idea and sets up his little table with some books and alphabet toys. While Dad is working around the house, he overhears Jared talking to himself. He takes on the roles of a teacher. Then a scared student. “I’m going to have lots of fun today,” Jared says. Then in a lower, “grown-up” voice, he adds, “And if you get scared, just remember your dad will pick you up soon.”



Tà lk With the Animals

Four-year-old Gisele loves to play with other kids and adults. But there are times when no one is around to play and Gisele has to entertain herself. Her mom helps by reminding her of all the ways they’ve played with her favorite toys in the past. “You can have a party with your animals,” she suggests. “Remember when we did that and the bear was the birthday girl?” Mom holds up the toy bear and makes it “talk.” Gisele laughs. A little while later Mom overhears Gisele “talking” to each of the animals. She gives them roles to play in her imaginative adventure. When she’s done with her own work, Mom asks if she can join in. Gisele happily reports everything she and her “friends” have been doing together.

Transition Tà lk

Four-and-a-half-year-old Nathan has some trouble controlling his temper and dealing with transitions from one activity to another. His grandparents have taught him to talk to himself out loud to help remember what is coming next. They have a big day planned. Before they leave the house, Grandpa says, “Remember where we’re going today, Nathan? First the store...” then he waits for Nathan to fill in the rest. “Then Aunt Cat’s house, then the zoo, then to the playground...” he pauses, looking at his grandpa. “Then home,” Grandpa says. “Good remembering! And if you start feeling mad...” “Count to ten,” Nathan says. “Not okay to hit or throw, just gotta use words and count.” “That’s great,” Grandpa says. “I think we’re going to have a really fun day.” He knows this helps Nathan, because he hears Nathan counting to himself when he gets frustrated, instead of hitting the way he used to.

