



Unlocking the Power of Warm, Interactive Conversations in Early Childhood Education

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Introduction

Why do some children thrive and outperform their peers despite their lower socio-economic status and what factors might be responsible? DataDrive2030's positive deviance initiative aims to explore these factors and to design cost-effective interventions that bridge outcomes gaps in early childhood. Building on quantitative and qualitative work and following initial exploratory work in collaboration with the DoMore Foundation and True North, we have narrowed our focus.

*Specifically, we are examining one factor shown to drive positive deviance: **warm, interactive conversations**. These are exchanges where practitioners tune into a child's interests and respond with curiosity, creativity, and warmth. These conversations are powerful opportunities to support a child's cognitive and emotional development, helping them feel seen, valued, and empowered.*

The Target Behavior: Warm, interactive Conversations

*The essence of this behaviour is simple, yet profound: **practitioners observe what a child is interested in and respond thoughtfully to extend the interaction**. This back-and-forth exchange involves noticing the child's cues, getting down to their level, and engaging in meaningful dialogue. For example, if a child is intently examining a bug in the garden, the practitioner might kneel down and say, "That's an interesting bug! What do you think it's doing?" By following the child's lead and asking open-ended questions, practitioners can spark curiosity and support deeper learning.*

Adult-child relationships can play a critical role in development ([Pianta et al., 2003](#)) and are increasingly recognised as valuable resources in prevention and intervention efforts, particularly beyond the traditional parent-child sphere. Research has shown that intentional focus on the quality of interactions, perceptions, and interactive skills can positively transform these relationships. The quality of these relationships depends on the adult's ability to accurately interpret and respond to the child's emotional and social signals, provide warmth and acceptance, and establish appropriate boundaries and support. Interactive conversations between an adult and a child encompass many of these skills.

A conceptual model of practitioner-child relationships identifies four key components: (a) individual characteristics of the practitioner and child, such as temperament, personality, and developmental history; (b) each individual's perception and representation of the relationship; (c) the relational processes through which information is exchanged, such as communication and feedback; and (d) external influences from the broader systems in which the relationship exists.

Building the Behavior: The Behavioral Change Model

Shifting to warm, interactive conversations requires a structured approach, which is why we use a behavioural model (Adapted from Ajzen, 1991, p.182) grounded in three core components:

1. **Cognitive Determinants of Behaviour:** Practitioners need to understand the value of these interactions and how they support child development. Training focuses on why noticing and responding to a child's interests matters.
2. **Behavioural Capabilities:** Skills such as asking open-ended questions, paraphrasing, and reflecting back on a child's responses are critical to sustaining these warm exchanges.
3. **Action Drivers:** Reinforcements such as social norms and structures that help practitioners stay motivated to implement this behaviour given many constraints.

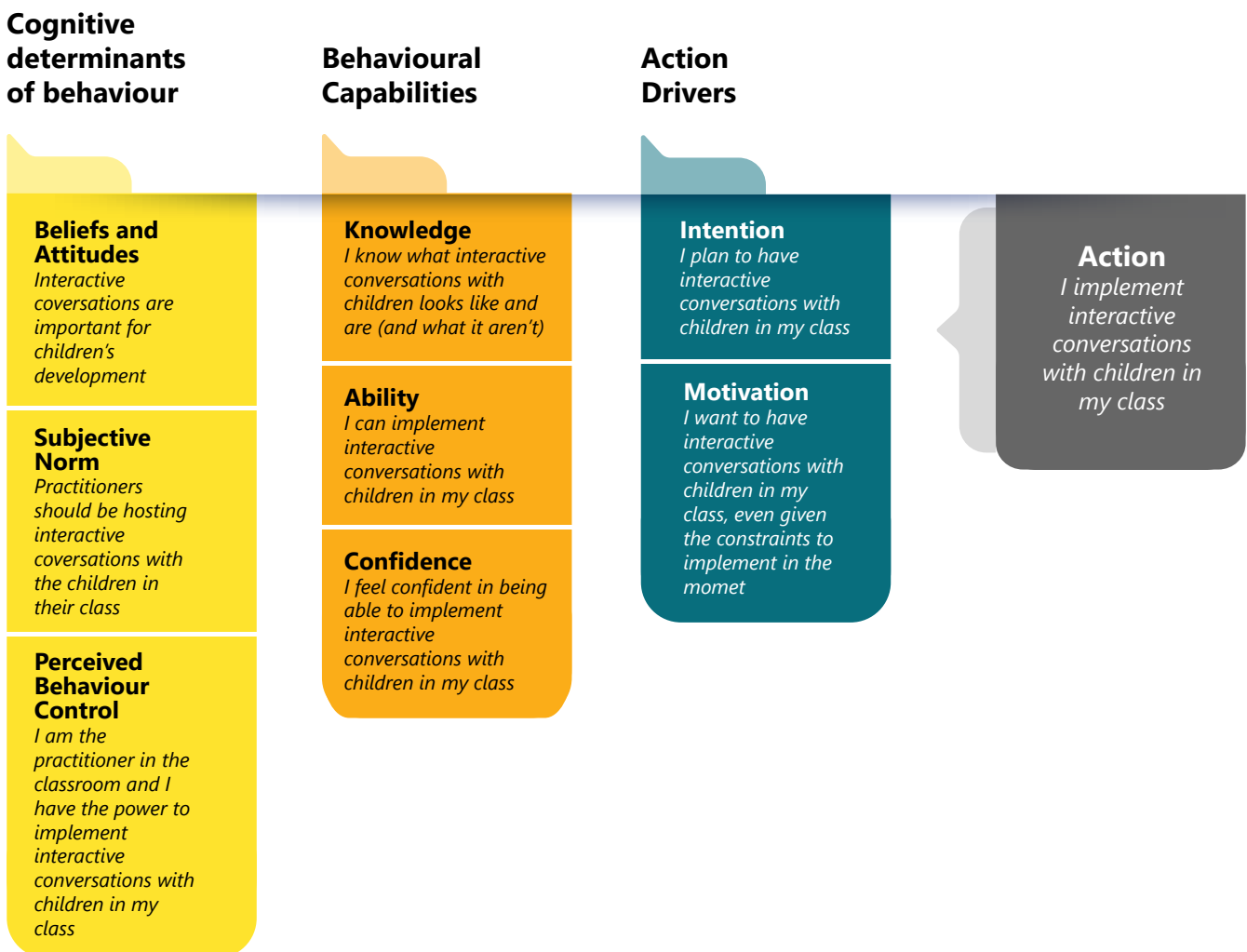


Figure 1: The Theory of Planned Behaviour in the context of a teacher¹ implementing interactive conversations. Adapted from Ajzen (1991), p.182.

¹ Teacher and practitioner are used interchangeably; referring to the adult who teaches the class of children aged 3 - 5 years.

Lessons Learnt: Supporting Practitioners in Interactive Conversations

Through our exploratory work, we've identified key lessons to support practitioners in adopting this behaviour:

Breaking It Down

Practitioners often find interactive conversations daunting at first. By breaking them into steps, we can make the behaviour more accessible. Training materials focus on small, achievable actions, such as recognising a child's focus and getting down to their level.

To help practitioners engage meaningfully with children, we highlight key steps that make up a successful warm conversation:

Tuning In to the Child's Interests



Practitioners learn to observe a child's focus, noticing subtle cues such as where their gaze lingers or what excites them. For instance, if a child is stacking blocks into an unconventional tower, the practitioner acknowledges this interest as the starting point for interaction. Physical positioning is crucial. Practitioners are encouraged to kneel or sit to align with the child's eye level, signalling attentiveness and creating a sense of equality in the exchange.

Responding and Reflecting



Building on the child's interests, practitioners respond warmly, naming the activity or feelings they observe. For example, they might say, "That is a very tall tower! And is much skinnier than the tower you made here."

Asking Open-Ended Questions



Open-ended prompts such as "What do you think will happen next?" or "What else could we add to the tower?" encourage children to think critically and lead the conversation, fostering creativity and exploration.

Creating Back-and-Forth Loops



Practitioners reflect on the child's responses and build on them, sustaining a dynamic interaction. They paraphrase, validate, and extend the conversation to keep the exchange engaging and meaningful.

Recognising Endings and New Beginnings



Conversations naturally ebb and flow. Practitioners are guided to recognise when an interaction is complete and look for new opportunities to re-engage with the child's evolving interests

The Role of Examples

Video coaching has been instrumental in demonstrating this behaviour. Practitioners learn best when they see it in action, whether through peer videos or their own interactions, accompanied by feedback.

Creating a Culture of Curiosity

Warm conversations thrive in environments where practitioners feel curious and creative themselves. By embedding reflective practices and fostering a culture of shared learning, we encourage practitioners to experiment and grow.

Overcoming Barriers: Supporting Behavioural Change

Changing behaviour is never without challenges. Practitioners face a range of barriers, from ingrained authority bias to limited time and confidence. Common hurdles include:

- **Authority Bias:** Many practitioners are accustomed to instructing children rather than learning with them. This didactic approach to the role of teaching can limit curiosity and conversation.
- **Fear of Uncertainty:** Practitioners often feel uncomfortable when they don't have "the right answer" to a child's question.
- **Practical Constraints:** High workloads and large class sizes make it hard to focus on individual interactions or to have the bandwidth to implement them.

Identifying Enablers: Growth Mindset of the Practitioner

A growth mindset, a concept developed by Carol Dweck, is the belief that intelligence, skills, and abilities can grow through effort, learning, and persistence ([Dweck, 2006](#)). It stands in contrast to a fixed mindset, where individuals see abilities as static and unchangeable. Those with a growth mindset approach challenges as opportunities to improve and learn, embracing effort as essential for growth. This perspective fosters resilience, intrinsic motivation, and a focus on continuous development. Furthermore, research indicates that practitioners who focus on effort and self-improvement, rather than innate ability, are more likely to foster greater motivation in children and promote more positive emotional experiences while reducing negative ones ([Ames, 1992](#)).

Warm interactive conversations—engaging, back-and-forth exchanges where practitioners notice and respond to children's interests—require flexibility, curiosity, and a willingness to explore the unknown. A growth mindset can act as a catalyst for these interactions by fostering key attitudes and behaviours:

1. Promoting Curiosity and Openness to Learning

Practitioners with a growth mindset view each child-led interaction as a chance to learn and grow. They are more likely to embrace the spontaneity of child-led conversations and explore topics where they might not have immediate answers, encouraging deeper dialogue and mutual learning.

2. Encouraging Experimentation and Adaptability

A growth mindset helps practitioners feel comfortable experimenting with new approaches, even when the outcomes are uncertain. This adaptability is critical in interactive conversations, where the practitioner must follow the child's interests and respond creatively to extend the interaction.

3. Resilience in the Face of Challenges

Interactive conversations can be challenging, particularly for practitioners who are unfamiliar with open-ended, child-led exchanges. A growth mindset fosters persistence, allowing practitioners to overcome discomfort or setbacks, such as moments when a conversation does not unfold as expected.

4. Modelling Learning Behaviors for Children

Practitioners with a growth mindset demonstrate the value of curiosity and persistence through their own behaviour. By actively engaging in open-ended conversations and showing enthusiasm for learning, they model these traits for children, who are likely to adopt similar attitudes.

The Path Forward: Scaling Warm, Interactive Conversations

Looking ahead, our next steps involve a dual approach to shifting behaviour through both direct and indirect channels. Through practical tools such as video coaching and reflective exercises, we plan to co-design and test an intervention that supports practitioners in developing the confidence and ability to create dynamic, child-led learning experiences.

Coaching and reflection have been shown to effectively increase the number of positive interactions between the teacher and child, for example with Teacher-Child Interaction Therapy (TCIT) ([McIntosh et al., 2000](#)). Programmes such as FIND ([Filming Interactions to Nurture Development](#)) and MyTeachingPartner (Pianta et al., 2022) demonstrate the value of video-based reflection to enhance social-emotional and academic outcomes.

To support practitioners in mastering this skill and building confidence, we're piloting a video coaching intervention inspired by the [FIND](#) model developed at Stanford University. FIND's approach focuses on breaking complex interactions into manageable, teachable moments. Drawing from this methodology, our video coaching intervention aims to help South African practitioners observe their behaviour, reflect on their interactions, and refine their skills to create richer, child-led exchanges. By focusing on real-life examples, video coaching transforms theoretical concepts into tangible practices. Over time, this process aims to build confidence, creativity, and adaptability, equipping practitioners to navigate diverse classroom scenarios with ease.

The Video Coaching Process

Practitioners are recorded during classroom activities, capturing authentic moments of engagement with children. Coaches then review these clips, breaking down interactions into specific components and offering targeted feedback. This actionable feedback, combined with visual examples, helps practitioners understand not only what to improve, but also how to do it.

For example, a coach might highlight how a practitioner effectively tuned in to a child's interests but missed an opportunity to extend the exchange with an open-ended question. The interaction below shows a warm response, but the conversation ends quickly. There was an opportunity to build on the child's comment and continue the exchange, but it stopped after a brief remark about the soup being nice.



Where are we now?

We are currently piloting this approach with SmartStart and are conducting some initial testing of this idea in Early Learning Programmes in South Africa. Potential collaborators interested in this project are invited to reach out to the DataDrive2030 team for more information on aimée@datadrive2030.co.za.

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