

Make the Most of Small Groups to Support Children's Interaction in the Classroom

In a busy early childhood setting, it can be challenging to engage every child in interactions, which is key to supporting their language development. But when we engage children in small groups, something magical happens. We create an encouraging space where each child can interact, while also allowing ourselves to:

- ✓ Observe each child more easily to see how involved they are in the activity.
- ✓ Take intentional steps to support children to become more engaged in interactions.



How it works

Step 1: Identify existing small group activities

Identify where small groups of three to five children already form naturally – for example, around a water table or at a snack table with limited seating.

Step 2: Create more opportunities for small groups

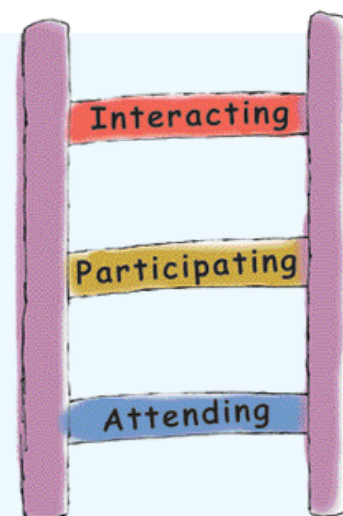
- **Identify activities that you currently do in large groups that you could transform into small group activities** – For example, separate children into smaller groups for book reading or stagger transitions like dressing for outdoors.
- **Set up spaces and activities to accommodate small groups** – For example, use partitions or shelving to create distinct play areas or “nooks”, such as a Building Block Area, Dramatic Centre, or Cozy Book Corner. Make sure each space has enough materials to attract and accommodate a small group, but also has limited seating/space.

Step 3: Identify a child's level of involvement in the activity

Small groups make it easier for you to closely observe each child's involvement and see where they fall on the **Ladder to Interaction**:

Is the child...

- Uninterested in the activity and not watching or participating?
 - They are at the **Not Attending Stage**
- Interested in the activity (e.g., they watch quietly), but not participating?
 - They are at the **Attending Stage**
- Actively taking part in the activity (e.g., by handling materials), but not interacting?
 - They are at the **Participating Stage**
- Starting interactions and responding to the educator and other children?
 - They are at the **Interacting Stage**



Step 4: Support the child to move up the ladder

Your goal is to help the child take the appropriate and realistic next step, which is to **move one rung up the ladder** toward interaction. You can do this by taking specific steps that meet the child where they currently are on the ladder:

For a child who is: Not attending

The goal is: To attend

- Ensure you're setting up activities that include the child's interests. This may help them notice the activity and entice them to take part.
- Invite the child to come explore the prepared activity, using their name and an enthusiastic voice. Modify an activity if you feel the child doesn't yet have the skills needed to participate.

For a child who is: Attending but not participating

The goal is: Participating

- Sit face to face with the child so you can carefully observe what they are most interested in. What part of the activity are they paying attention to most?
- Offer the child materials related to their interest. For example, if you see that they're watching another child dump out water during a water play activity, offer the child a cup or watering can so they can do the same.
- Direct a comment to the child or ask them a question related to their interest. Keep your questions open-ended and avoid testing questions.

For a child who is: Participating but not interacting

The goal is: Interacting

- Sit across from the child so you can easily see each other.
- Make a comment or ask an open-ended question related to what the child is doing.
- Look at the child expectantly and wait for them to send a message.
- Observe carefully for any kind of message the child may send (could be a small gesture, quick look or soft sound).
- If the child sends a message, respond right away with a comment that relates directly to what they have said or communicated.

This handout is based on content from the Hanen Learning Language and Loving It™ guidebook. Learn more about how you can support language, literacy and social skills in early childhood settings at www.hanen.org/LLLguidebook