



Waddington All Saints Academy

A L.E.A.D. Academy

High Quality Adult Interactions in Reception

At Waddington All Saints Academy, high quality interactions are at the forefront of teaching and learning. This is underpinned by positive relationships, where our practitioners know the children's interests and needs well, and in turn can promote emotional security and wellbeing, confidence and resilience and develop executive functioning and self-regulation skills.





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Why are high quality interactions important?

High-quality interactions are one of the most important elements of effective practice in a Reception setting because they have a direct impact on how children think, communicate, learn and develop socially and emotionally.

We know that practitioners are the most effective resource in provision and the **Education Endowment Foundation (EEF)** identifies high-quality interactions as a key driver in improving outcomes for young children, particularly in communication and language, vocabulary development, self-regulation and early thinking skills.

High-quality interactions:

- Develop **communication and language skills** as children learn language through conversations with adults, supporting their speaking and listening, understanding, receptive and expressive language, giving foundational knowledge for early literacy development.
- Support **emotional security and building positive relationships**. Responsive interactions with adults help children to feel safe, supported, valued and listened to. This in turn supports confidence, resilience and emotional regulation.
- Promote **thinking and problem solving**, an important factor linked to the Characteristics of Effective Learning. Children are encouraged to explain their ideas, make predictions, link skills and knowledge, plan and reflect.
- **Extend learning opportunities within play** experiences. The importance of learning through play is underpinned by interactions, where practitioners can join play, take opportunities to create meaningful teaching moments and extend ideas whilst children remain engaged and motivated.
- Allow for **adaptive practice** which enables practitioners to make formative assessments, identify barriers and misconceptions and help to close attainment gaps. Practitioners are able to use a range of strategies during high-quality interactions to support language development, implement scaffolding approaches and tailor learning to individual children.





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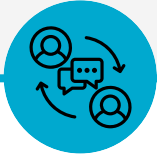
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How do we promote high quality interactions at Waddington All Saints Academy?

We use three main approaches to effectively facilitate high quality interactions within Reception:

ShREC

To develop skills for back-and-forth conversation, promote communication and extend thinking and learning.



STAIRS

To scaffold learning, model and support children, enabling them to master tasks which may be too difficult for them to do on their own.



Sustained Shared Thinking

For adults and children to 'work together' to solve problems, clarify concepts, evaluate and extend learning.





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What does the research say?

Research used by the EEF demonstrates that the development of children's communication and language through socially meaningful interactions should be prioritised.

“Children thrive on conversation with people they have a strong relationship with, focused on things they want to talk about” (EEF 2025).

ShREC

The ShREC approach was specifically designed by the EEF as an evidence-based framework to support early years practitioners to initiate and sustain **high quality back and forth conversations** with children. It provides five steps to implement which, when embedded well and used consistently, support **everyday practice** and therefore the development of communication and interaction skills. Through developing **shared attention**, **responding** to the child's communication and **expanding** on what has been said by the child, the practitioner is able to develop skills to enable a back and forth **conversation** to take place.

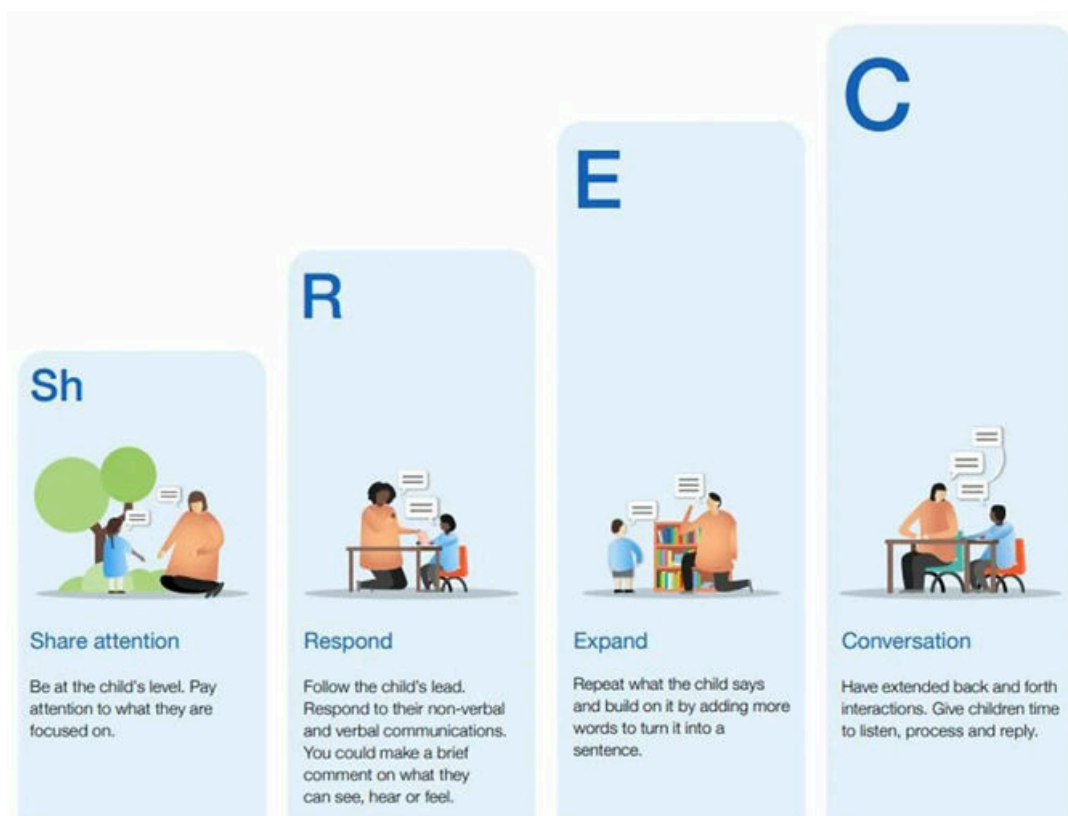


Image from the EEF website (2025)



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STAIRS

‘Scaffolding’ is one of the most important interactions that promotes learning. It can only happen during an episode of shared attention, once you have positioned yourself at the child’s level and are paying close attention to what they are focusing on.” (EEF, 2025)

The EEF developed the STAIRS model for **scaffolding** with an aim to provide appropriate adult support and a level of challenge for the children that is **‘just right’**. This allows children to **achieve their goals**, but the approach also enables a **gradual release of support** to reduce dependence on others and develop independent learning skills.

In order for this to happen, the practitioner must:

- Establish shared attention with the child
- Know the child well including their strengths, next steps, motivators and barriers
- Ensure the child knows what they are aiming towards and how they can be successful
- Ensure all interactions are positive and rooted with strong relationships.



STAIRS focuses on 5 key principles in order for children to receive appropriate support, whilst being challenged and building independence.

- There must be **shared attention** between the practitioner and the child, with the focus being on the child’s level and focusing on the same activity.
- There should be opportunities to **thrive together**, by enjoying the activity, giving the children time to think and respond to interactions and sharing positivity to build executive functioning skills.
- Practitioners must build in strategies to **avoid frustration**, through knowing the children well and simplifying the task so that it is within capability, encouraging the children to try new things and take on challenges and support with skills or knowledge that is beyond the child’s current capability.
- During this process, practitioners and children must talk together, allowing the child to know what the end goal is and the steps to achieve this. This is also an opportunity to **highlight key features** and give the children opportunities to solve problems before adults step in.
- Practitioners must support children to **review progress**, but reflecting on how well they are progressing towards the end goal and demonstrating strategies to use if they are finding it difficult.
- Throughout, practitioners must encourage the child to do as much as they can and reduce support to limit dependence, building in strategies for **self-motivation**.



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Sustained Shared Thinking (SST)

Sustained Shared Thinking is defined as:

“An episode in which two or more individuals “work together” in an intellectual way to solve a problem, clarify a concept, evaluate activities, extend a narrative etc. Both parties must contribute to the thinking and it must develop and extend.” (Researching Effective Pedagogy in the Early Years, 2002).

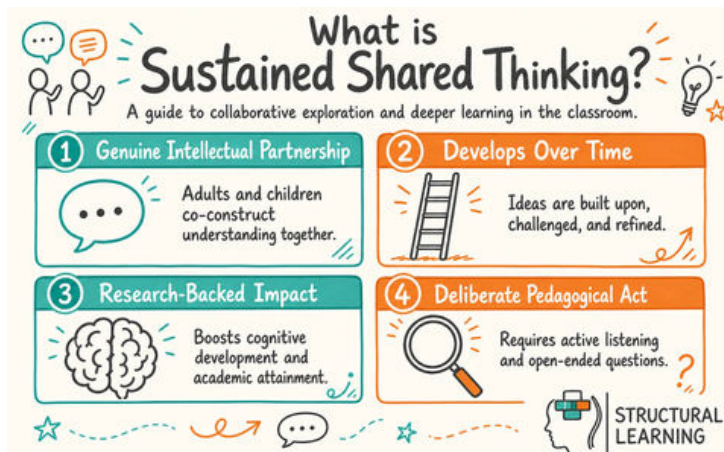
The research project ‘Researching Pedagogy in the Early Years’ (REPEY, 2002) undertaken by the Department for Education and Skills identifies sustained shared thinking as a core element in effective early years pedagogy, to extend children’s thinking. This is underpinned by Development Matters which states “sustained shared thinking is especially powerful” (2023).

In order to enable sustained shared thinking opportunities, adults and children must **share engagement** and take part in **back-and-forth communication** where interactions are long and meaningful.

The SST approach emphasises the importance of both the adult and the child joining together in interactions and **exchanging information**. This means that interactions must be **sustained** over a period of time, to allow for **thinking to deepen**.

Interactions move beyond the practitioner sharing information and short exchanges, becoming a two-way tool where adults and children **build ideas together**, to deepen thinking and solve problems.

For sustained shared thinking to take place, practitioners must have a clear and in depth understanding of the **knowledge and skills** being developed, so that they are able to facilitate effective opportunities for this approach to take place.





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What does this look like at Waddington All Saints?

Before the children access independent learning time in provision, adults share new enhancements and model skills and vocabulary that could be used whilst in the area. This is also an opportunity to gather the children's ideas and build enthusiasm and engagement.

When children are in independent learning time, adults maintain a clear overview of the room and move around provision areas throughout the session. Adults ensure to spend sustained periods of time with children in play scenarios, enabling opportunities for high-quality interactions and back-and-forth communication.

Adults have a clear understanding of the knowledge and skills being developed across provision, alongside knowledge of each child's strengths and next steps. Adults use this knowledge to support, scaffold, challenge and for formative assessment opportunities.

Interactions in Provision

When interacting in provision, adults use communication stems, which include comments, narration and questioning to facilitate high-quality interactions and back-and-forth communication.

Gaining Shared Attention

- Adults ensure that they are on the children's level and engage with the child's play.
- Adults are present in play, they pay close attention to what the children are doing and show genuine interest.
- Adults join the child's play, taking on a role and following the lead of the child

"I can see you're really concentrating on..."

"You have noticed something interesting!"

"I wonder what..."

"You chose to use the..."

"Show me what happens next."

Responding to a child

- Adults have a clear understanding of the children that they are working with. This ensures that responses are tailored to individual children.
- All adults recognise and acknowledge children's verbal and non-verbal communication and respond with a supportive approach, which stimulates further thinking and engagement. This includes strategies such as asking an open question, narrating what the child is doing or responding in a play role.
- Adults use this opportunity to develop joint engagement in an activity, focusing on the process of learning, emotional literacy and development of skills.

"That was a good idea because..."

"You kept trying even though it was tricky."

"I noticed you changed your plan."

"I can see you have... (link to skills)"

"You look proud of what you have achieved"



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Expanding Language

- Adults model and scaffold the learning, including key skills that the children are developing.
- Adults listen carefully to what the children say and use their own language to expand what has been shared already, repeating and building on language by adding more words or a specific piece of vocabulary. An example of this is:

C: "a big tower"

A: "it is a tall and sturdy tower"

- Adults explicitly teach and model rich vocabulary, including vocabulary that is beyond the child's current level.

"You are investigating..."

"You predicted that..."

"That material is transparent/waterproof"

"It collapsed because..."

"You have partitioned the counters into equal groups."

STAIRS

Adults use a scaffolding approach to build children's resilience and confidence, alongside their speech and communication skills.

- Adults know the children well, including their strengths and next steps, how is best to help them and what motivates them.
- Adults talk through the steps with the child, so that they know the end goal and how they are going to be successful.
- Consistent positivity and praise is used, so the child feels supported and believes that they can achieve.
- Adults provide opportunities for the children to explore independently and work alongside the child, continuing to comment, narrate and ask open-ended questions.
- Adults set challenges for the children, supporting with aspects that are beyond the child's current capabilities by modelling key skills and using specific vocabulary.

"You have made a great start, what do you think we need to do next?"

"You said that..., so..."

"Our goal is... First we could..."

"I can see you are..."

"Remember when we did something like this before..."





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Making Conversation and developing Sustained Shared Thinking (SST)

- As in the 'expand' stage, adults listen carefully and continue to make comments, narrate and ask open ended questions which allow children to think and elaborate on their ideas.
- During this time, adults continue to stay in their play role and focus on 'commenting more, questioning less'. They observe carefully and respond to ideas and cues given by the children, rather than asking questions which are rigid. Rather than:

"What shape is that?"

Adults may say:

"I wonder what made your tower sturdy..."

or

"Can you tell me more about your repeating pattern?"

- Adults use this opportunity to pose challenges and 'wonder' alongside the children, developing sustained shared thinking skills. They actively encourage children to predict, test ideas, plan, reflect on outcomes.

"What do you think might happen if..."

"Can you explain your idea to me? You have already..."

"I wonder how you could solve that problem..."

"This reminds me when we..."

"Have you seen something like this before?"

"I wonder what will happen next..."

- Adults continue to model and teach rich vocabulary and help children explain their thinking.
- Throughout back and forth interactions and opportunities for SST, adults continue to use strands of scaffold to encourage independent thinking and provide 'just enough' support.





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How does our environment support high quality interactions?

To create an enabling environment, rich in language and one that promotes high-quality interactions, a number of strategies must be considered. At Waddington All Saints Academy, we ensure our environments are intentionally organised to encourage communication, exploration, thinking and sustained shared conversations between practitioners and children.

Key features of our environments are:

High focus on positive and strong relationships

Warm and trusting relationships help children feel confident to communicate, ask questions and share ideas. We ensure that adults are always available for the children to talk to and take part in all provision opportunities alongside the children. Adults demonstrate a genuine interest in the children and are enthusiastic to talk and share experiences.

Clear and explicit routines of the day, including opportunities to talk

Routines provide a safe and secure learning environment, supporting children to develop confidence and language skills. We also ensure that children have opportunities to talk, for example during fruit and milk time, during collaborative play, in story times and Drawing Club and opportunities to sing and say rhymes.

Reflection time

At the end of morning and afternoon sessions, children and adults take part in 'reflection time' where they discuss the learning that has taken place, think about achievements, what they have worked hard on, what might have been tricky and what they might do next time as a result.

Communication-friendly spaces

Children are more likely to engage in meaningful interactions when environments feel calm, accessible and inviting. This includes cosy book areas, clearly defined areas for small groups, opportunities for role play, quiet spaces and open-ended resources that encourage discussion.





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Invitations into provision

We use chalkboards with 'I wonder' and open-ended questions to invite the children into play opportunities. These often give children a challenge or thinking point and are linked to a skill within each clearly defined area.

Engaging provision to promote curiosity and investigation

Carefully planned provision is a priority to ensure that it is highly engaging and looks irresistible for the children to access. This includes provision that goes beyond the 'here and now' to develop imagination and promote conversations about the past, future and wider world.



Links to children's interests

Adults take into account children's interests when planning provision opportunities to provide opportunities for children to talk about subjects and resources that they are engaged in e.g. adding animals into sand areas, a focus on space, reading children's favourite books.

High quality books

Our environments provide opportunities to access a wide range of high quality books, including fiction and non-fiction, poems and rhymes. We link books to key areas to make sure clearly defined areas are text rich and change these through the year to remain engaging and to promote new opportunities to talk.

Inclusive Practice

Our environments and practitioners value all forms of communication including Makaton and gesture, opportunities to share own languages, visual supports such as 'when and then' boards, visual timetables and widgeits, storytelling and learning through songs. Adults adapt interactions to meet individual communication needs.

Use of photos

We use a range of real life photos in provision and photos of the children on displays, to promote talk around previous learning experiences and to give a visual memory hook.





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Language Rich

We ensure that children regularly see meaningful print in a range of ways, including clearly labelled resources, signs, handwritten and print vocabulary, children's own written labels and a range of words on displays. We also ensure there are a range of 'Widgits' to support dual-coding.

'Flow up' displays

Our displays are designed to 'flow up' from provision areas, so that the children are able to see the process and outcomes of their learning on display in real time. This develops rich opportunities for talk and promotes engagement within learning. Displays also include vocabulary, photos and inspiration alongside children's own learning and outcomes.

Displayed Vocabulary

We display a range of vocabulary including new and ambitious words, subject-specific, emotive, mathematical and descriptive vocabulary.

Adults revisit and reinforce vocabulary through high-quality interactions and in meaningful contexts.



Organisation and Independent Access

Our environments remain well organised and labelled. The children are able to access all classroom resources with independence, to encourage choice, exploration and investigation and providing opportunities to share learning experiences based on their choices.

Play-based learning

High-quality interactions appen naturally in well-planned play experiences. We provide a range of open ended resources such as loose parts, role play, sand, water and small world to encourage discussion, imagination and problem-solving.