

**Enriching Family Programming  
Using the Smithsonian Institution's  
*Talk with Me Toolkits*  
Program Manual**



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Smithsonian Institution’s *Talk with Me Toolkits* (TMTs) provide parents and caregivers<sup>1</sup> opportunities to talk with their children to improve critical thinking, vocabulary, and language development. Talking with a child is great—and research shows that the *quality* of words children hear matters more than the *quantity*.

The online Toolkits give caregivers ideas to begin conversations about high-quality, authentic materials that are organized around a theme. The Toolkits can feature videos, photographs, paintings, and artworks, primarily digital artifacts from the Smithsonian collection, along with questions and ideas to discuss with children. At the end of each Toolkit there are recommendations for activities to do and books to read together.

### TMT Objectives

- To foster and strengthen discussion between caregivers and children that promotes children’s language and literacy development.
- To introduce caregivers and children to an array of materials from the Smithsonian.

### TMT Description

The Smithsonian OET has 18 free TMT digital collections to support caregiver-child interactions. TMT topics include Nature, Air and Space, Music, Myself and My World, and Art. Several collections use [Project Zero](#) thinking routines (e.g., [See, Think, Wonder](#)) to prompt conversation and discussion.

Six collections were modified to support broader conversations, learn new vocabulary, and to provide opportunities to learn about the resources available at the Smithsonian. The varied topics allow for integrating a TMT into a family literacy program’s three to four component model or a library’s existing family engagement programming. The six Toolkit collections include:

- Air and Space: Can it Fly?
- Art: Colors, Shapes, Lines
- Art: Light & Shadow
- Me and My World: My Neighborhood
- Music: Animal Tracks
- Nature: Who Lives in the Soil?

Each Toolkit begins by presenting generic instructions about the Toolkit; then viewers can click through high-quality images, artifacts, and digital media. Text includes brief information about the image or artifact, words, or short phrases (e.g., “look closely,” “zoom in on the picture”), new vocabulary words about the topic, suggested questions to promote conversation, and prompts and brief instructions for extension activities (e.g., “Look at the photos and videos together”).

To expand the understanding of Toolkit content, suggestions are provided for a variety of related hands-on activities for caregivers and children to do together either during the programming or at

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
<sup>1</sup> We use *caregiver* throughout the document to refer to parents, caregivers, and other adults who help raise and care for children.




home. Three books related to the Toolkit topics are also listed and caregivers are encouraged to read the books with their children. Additional books are listed at the end of the Toolkit to promote further reading about the topic.

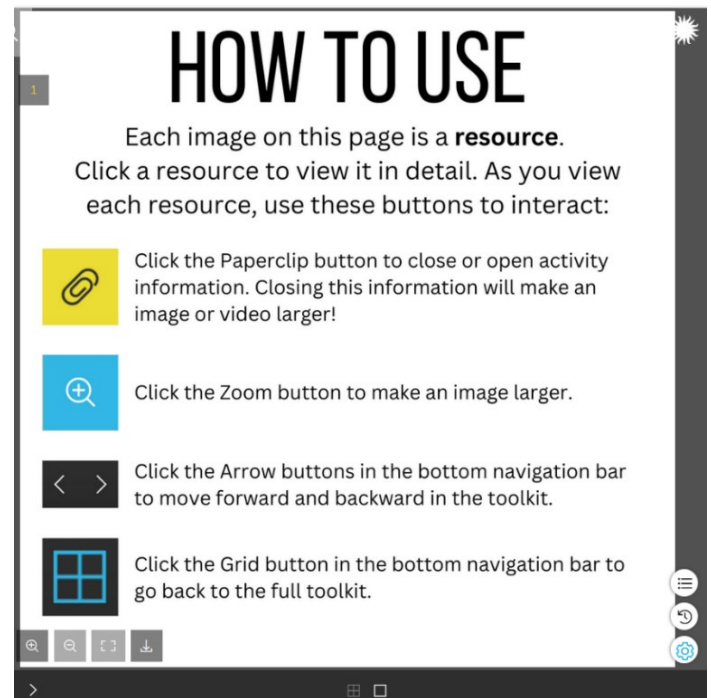
Each Toolkit follows a similar structure:

- Title
- How to use the Toolkit – information about icons and how to proceed through the TMT
- Look or Watch – images and videos with vocabulary and question prompts
- Play – activities that include instructions and a list of supplies related to the activities
- Read together – books related to the topic with question prompts

The Toolkit slides are introduced in a grid format that allows an overview of the entire TMT. Once the title page is clicked on, there are two main

arrows  at the bottom of each TMT slide to help navigate back and forth throughout the Toolkit. In addition, each slide includes other icons (e.g., paperclip, zoom), all of which are explained at the beginning of each TMT. To get back to the grid, click on the grid.

The slide immediately to the left  (paperclip icon) of the graphic  or video is automatically displayed and lists discussion questions that are meant to help facilitate conversation. If a question mentions zooming in on the picture, click on the zoom icon.  Discussion questions are also included on the Read Together slides.



Caregivers and children can easily scroll through the Toolkit on any computer or tablet. If using a tablet, be sure to turn it sideways to be able to view the questions and image simultaneously. Although the TMT can be viewed on a smartphone, we do not recommend that because the Toolkits have not been totally formatted for the smartphone, so it is difficult to view the questions and images at the same time. However, if the caregiver wants to access a TMT on a smartphone, make sure the caregiver understands they need to click on the paperclip to see the questions.

## ***Talk with Me Toolkit Session***

### **Tips for Setting up the TMT Session**

#### *Technology*

Set up individual laptops or tablets for each caregiver and child to use together.

- If possible, project the TMT from a device onto a screen so that families can follow the TMTs and you can model the types of conversations that the Toolkit might spark.
- The projection of the TMT will also allow caregivers and children to view the videos together, which might be necessary depending on the size of the group. Pause after the video to allow time to answer the questions and for conversation to occur between the caregiver and child.

#### *Environment*

- Request that caregivers put their phones away so that they can focus on interacting with their child.
- Adjust how you present the TMTs based on the number of families and small children and the amount of noise in the room.
  - If there are a lot of families participating, the noise level can be difficult for caregivers and children to talk together, therefore, allow time for caregivers and children to talk together about the images. Bring the group back together to view the videos so that everyone can hear them.
- If possible, provide additional space for activities for children outside of the targeted age group (5 to 8 years of age) so that families with children at the targeted ages can talk and interact together with limited distraction. If this is not possible, assist parents with how to ask questions for various child age levels.

#### *Developing a session plan*

TMTs include items in a similar order – introductory slide, images, videos, activities, and books. A few TMTs may intersperse the videos and slides slightly differently. For example, “*Who lives in the soil?*” sometimes presents an image and then a video about that image (e.g., image of dung beetle and then a video).

- Determine the order and number of slides and videos to present to families. Sometimes it may be more appropriate to show only a few videos or slides. Review the TMT prior to the family session and try to estimate the length of time needed for caregivers and children to talk about each slide or complete activities. Gauge interest in the room because some slides and videos invite more conversation than others.
- To increase families’ understanding of how to best use the TMTs, go through the first slide together as a group. For example, use the first slide to ask the group a question and role-model how to ask open-ended questions to extend the conversation.

- Depending on the number of families and the noise level in the room, decide if the video should be presented to the whole group or if caregivers and children should go through the videos together on their device and have a discussion.
- Librarians or instructors may decide to have families to go through the slides at their own pace, then when they have independently completed the slides and videos, have families choose a book to read together.
- If families need an icebreaker to encourage conversation, a TMT activity can be presented prior to introducing the TMT slides and videos. However, it is very important that all activity materials are collected before progressing through the TMT to decrease distraction and increase focus on the TMT images, videos, and discussion questions.

### *Activities*

- Select how many complementary hands-on activities to use in the session depending on the size of the group, availability of materials, and time allotted for the session.
- Each activity in the Toolkit includes a list of steps for the activity and supplies needed. Be sure to decide which activities you will use in the session, have the necessary supplies on hand, and have enough time to try the activity or activities yourself before the session.
- Develop other activities that are appropriate for the families, if desired. Encourage movement activities if working with younger children.

### *Books*

- Each Toolkit lists three books and provides discussion questions for the caregivers and children to ask each other. If families check out the books, try to provide the list of questions to families to prompt discussion at home.
- As mentioned, additional book titles are listed at the end of each Toolkit related to the topic. If books are taken home, encourage families to discuss the book by asking their child questions.
- Book reading during the TMT session:
  - provide a copy of the book to each family along with the discussion questions, which are also on the TMT slides. Allow children and caregivers to read the book and have a discussion, or
  - read the book aloud to both caregivers and children and model a discussion.
- Before the end of the session, allow opportunities for caregivers to check out book or books so that they can read with their child at home.
  - If caregivers check out the books, provide a handout that lists the questions from the TMT for that book. Also provide the link or QR code for the caregiver to access the TMT at home while reading the book so that they can refer to the slides.
  - Provide additional books for families to check out related to the TMT topic. Extra books are listed at the end of the TMT.

## Tips for Implementing the TMT Session

### *Offering TMT sessions in a family literacy program*

- Adult Education Component –
  - Develop lesson plans based on the Toolkit topics (e.g., learning about soil).
  - Print out the Toolkit questions and vocabulary to learn and for review to be prepared for the interactive literacy activity (ILA) session.
  - Explore how the website and TMT format work to support comfort with digital literacy.
  
- Parent Education Component –
  - Review the vocabulary and talk about how the words could be used at home (e.g., using the *Art: Light & Shadow* vocabulary words of translucent, transparent, and opaque).
  - Discuss how important conversations and learning vocabulary are for language and literacy development.
  - Review strategies for vocabulary development.
  - Model and practice how to ask questions to further conversations (e.g., open ended questions).
  
- Interactive Literacy Component –
  - Provide examples of how the questions and prompts are meant as a springboard for deeper conversations.
  - Read the book with the caregivers and children to model interactive reading.
  - Decide on the activity or activities you want caregivers and children to do together and have the supplies on hand.
  - Choose a book from the three provided appropriate for the age group attending your session.

### *Offering TMT sessions in the library*

- To start the session, go through the *How to Use* slide so caregivers and children understand the different icons and how to navigate the slides.
  - Point out the paperclip icon, which has information/questions about each image, the go back/go forward buttons, and zoom in/out buttons.
- Explain that as families go through the slides, questions and prompts will appear on the left side of the screen to encourage conversation between the caregiver and child. Let caregivers know that the questions are prompts and they can add questions to expand the discussion. Try to model conversational turn-taking for the caregivers.
- Be sure to emphasize the importance of children learning new vocabulary words and that each slide introduces new words related to the topic.
- Model how to ask questions to promote interactions. Asking children open-ended questions starts a conversation and helps develop children's brains, encourages children to ask questions, and supports reflection.

- Caregivers should be involved in reading the book with their child in some way to encourage interactions and discussion.

### **Encouraging Use of the TMT at Home**

- Encourage families to repeat the Toolkit at home and let them know about the other available Toolkits online. If possible, provide a link and/or QR code to access the TMT.
- Encourage families to complete additional activities at home so that they can continue to learn and talk at home.
  - If possible, provide take-home bags with supplies for caregivers and children to complete the activity or activities at home.
  - If you cannot provide take-home bags, print out the materials and instructions.

## ***Talk with Me Toolkits***

### **Links, Activities, and Books**

The following pages provide a list of activities, supplies, books, and questions for each Toolkit to help with setting up each TMT session.

The TMTs can be found at: <https://learninglab.si.edu/org/talk-with-me-toolkits>, or individually:

*Air & Space: Can It Fly? -*

- <https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/air-space-can-it-fly/Ho4XO8eYcm5WTglG>
- Learn about things that fly and how they do it! In this Toolkit you will explore animals and aircraft and have fun with different activities.

*Art: Colors, Shapes, Lines -*

- <https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/art-colors-shapes-lines/BkgK5emWCA1vfI8P>
- Learn about colors, shapes, and lines with this Toolkit!

*Art: Light & Shadow -*

- <https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/art-light-shadow/5evHENYkai7xS9T6>
- Learn about lights and shadows and how they occur in the world around us. This Toolkit will help you explore how light on objects can make fun shadows!

*Me and My world: My Neighborhood -*

- <https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/me-and-my-world-my-neighborhood/DkrYFQVgo3Ipc0C2>
- Learn about your community and neighborhood. This Toolkit will help you explore homes, shops, and people in your neighborhood.

*Music: Animal Tracks -*

- <https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/music-animal-tracks/e7hwsIscQD9ILyFE>
- Learn about the sounds animals make and how they move! In this Toolkit you will explore animals and have fun with different activities.

*Nature: Who Lives in the Soil? - <https://s.si.edu/tmt-soil>*

- <https://learninglab.si.edu/collections/nature-who-lives-in-the-soil/0xeEBKIFi3S59ANH>
- Learn about soil and animals that live in it! This Toolkit will help you explore bugs, insects, worms, and other animals that live in dirt.

*Please note that links to third-party websites and videos are included in the Toolkits for informational purposes only, and they do not indicate the Smithsonian's endorsement, sponsorship of, or affiliation with the third party or content of the linked site, including any advertisements that may be posted.*