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Published: 14 December 2007

Pupils who talk in class are traditionally viewed as disrupting the lesson. In fact they are advancing their learning, according to the latest report from the national review into primary education.

It reveals that social interaction among children plays a key role in their development.

But opportunities for children to talk among themselves in class are often limited as teachers dismiss their conversations as disruptive or irrelevant. Chris Davis, of the National Primary Headteachers' Association, said: "A good teacher will have a well-developed tolerance level and will know the difference between a working buzz and a riot."

The report reveals that encouraging children to work together can enhance their understanding of a topic. Similarly, an ability to reach consensus through discussion is helpful to general development.

But outright competition can be counter-productive. The report says: "Disputational talk, which is highly competitive and full of disagreements, is not conducive to learning." Mr Davis questions the practicality of this. "Competition is natural," he said. "Even within the smallest group there will be children working at different levels. But it needs careful controlling so it doesn't get out of hand."

Friends working together are more likely to achieve effective results than children who are not friends. Nicholas Tucker, a child psychologist, said: "You share things with your friends. There's no incentive to do anything at all with people you're not interested in."

The report also claims that out-of-school experiences influence the degree to which different pupils are equipped to participate in group discussions.

Teachers should therefore lay out clear ground rules for collaborative work and provide assistance for pupils who need it.

Children in primary schools: social development and learning, by Christine Howe and Neil Mercer (Cambridge University).

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