

## **ENHANCING THE LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT OF YOUNG CHILDREN**

Language is an organized system of symbols that has meaning and is used for interpersonal and intrapersonal communication (Byrne, 1978). Most children learn how to talk without any difficulty at all. Spoken language develops within an environment that encourages a child to experiment with words to express wishes and ideas. The role of the parent or caregiver in the child's language development is extremely important. A parent or caregiver talks to the baby from the first days of life. He or she may ask questions, for which an answer is not expected, such as *Are you hungry?* The adult supplies the child's words for names of things and actions. Some children need more focused language stimulation than others to learn to talk. Children with language delays can be helped by the way their parents and other important adults talk, listen, and respond to them. Adults can learn to make everyday home activities and routines language-learning experiences for their children. The following are some ideas and examples of ways that adults can help to provide with a rich language-learning environment.

### **Exposing Children to a Variety of Language**

1. When your child is present, talk to yourself about what you are doing, seeing, hearing, and thinking (e.g., This dish is dirty. I'd better wash it.).
2. Talk to your child about what he/she is doing, seeing, and hearing. Pair words with actions (e.g., You are making the car go fast. Uh oh, it fell off the table.).
3. While looking at picture books, point out names of items on the page (e.g., Here is a pig. See the duck.). It is also important to give your child more information than just the label (e.g., Here is a little pig. It is eating. It must be hungry.). Be enthusiastic, stress the action in the picture (e.g., The kitty is sleeping. Kitty must be tired. Night, night kitty.).
4. While looking at picture books, ask the child some questions. It is a way to help your child use the vocabulary he/she is learning. Children often enjoy responding to questions such as *What's that?*, *Where is the cow?*, *Who is sleeping?* As long as the child is having fun and feels successful doing this, a certain amount of question asking can be fine. However, adults must be sure that the child does not feel confronted by the questions, keeping him/her from enjoying the activity, or seeking out new information.
5. During your child's daily routines, describe his/her actions (e.g., You are brushing your teeth), label the objects (e.g., toothbrush, toothpaste), and expand with more information (e.g., Your toothbrush is small. Mommy's toothbrush is big).

## Listening to Children and Responding to What They Are Trying to Say

It is important to listen carefully to children's attempts to communicate, to try to understand and respond. This helps children gain confidence in their ability to talk.

### Listening to Children

1. It is often difficult to understand what a child is trying to say. Adults should try to guess the meaning of the child's utterance, put it into their own words, and check to determine if it is correct.

For example: Child: *Ju*

Adult: *Juice? You want juice?*

2. Expand what the child says into a slightly more grammatically complex statement.

For example: Child: *Shoe*

Adult: *Yes that's my shoe; Mommy's shoe.*

This gives a grammatical model while also helping the child feel that his/her talking is important and worthy of a response.

3. Add related comments to what a child says to expand the child's knowledge.

For example: Child: *Daddy bye bye*

Adult: *That's right. Daddy went bye bye. He went to the store. He went in the car.*

4. When a child uses gestures without words, give him/her some simple word to express what he/she wants. For example, if a child holds up her arms, the adult says *up? You want up?* If the child repeats *up* you should show pleasure and pick her up right away. If she doesn't say anything, give the model again and pick her up anyway. The goal is for the child to move from gesture alone, to gesture plus imitated word, to gesture and spontaneous word, and eventually, to word alone.
5. Encourage the use of words rather than gestures by positive reinforcement (smile, word of praise, giving the child what he/she asks for) but do not deny a child something because he/she has not spoken. If you know the child has the word in his/her repertoire, but is only using a gesture, wait briefly, saying *what do you want? what did you say?* If there is still no response, use a word yourself as a model before giving the child what was requested.

Children learn by active and self-motivated learning. Children are most likely to learn new words and concepts when they are presented in the context of their own interests and concerns. There are endless opportunities for language stimulation throughout the day and evening. Home routines can become fun, enjoyable activities, filled with language stimulation.

## References

Byrne, M.C. (1978). Appraisal of child language acquisition. In F.L. Darley, Diagnostic methods in speech pathology. (2<sup>nd</sup> ed., pp.102-177). New York: Harper & Row.

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