

Facilitating young children's speech and language

Jessica Ball, MPH. Ph.D. University of Victoria, Canada

Children learn to listen at an early age and the oral tradition means that listening and communication are an important part of preserving teachings, stories and life lessons. Parents and family members are a child's most important teachers about communication. A child's talking and listening skills develop from spending time with others in a variety of situations. If a child lives with positive and respectful communication from those around them, they will learn to interact with others in the same way.

Everyday family life and conversations help your child learn new words and ways of doing things. Oral language (talking, listening) is the gateway to reading. This collection of tips are for family members to support the young child's learning of early language and literacy skills:

Conversation:

- pay careful attention when the child talks to you. Being a good listener takes time, practise and patience. Sometimes adults say the wrong thing and the child will learn good communication skills from role modelling (e.g. "Sorry I interrupted you. What were you saying?")
- repeat what your child said in your own words to show that you are listening and understanding their words and feelings
- When your child comes to you and says something, although it might be difficult for you to listen and respond every time, try not to interrupt them. If you cannot give your attention, let your child know by asking them if they can wait until you have time and follow through
- talk to your child about what you see, do and think

Naming and describing:

- point out, name or label things inside, outside, everywhere you are - keep in mind that your child needs to hear the word many times in a variety of situations to understand a new word and then they will test it out by using it.
- talking about what an item is used for, where it comes from, what it goes with, and exploring how things go together in groups (sorting) will build the child's understanding and ability to remember the new word later
- talk about how some things are alike and use words that describe this (e.g. These toys are soft/hard.)

Make meaning from printed words:

- your child will know the alphabet letters and read words by the end of grade one and you can help by pointing out and reading printed words and letters that you come across every day
- show your child names, letters and words when you open mail, look at the cereal box, and respond to signs along the road or in public places
- play with letters and the sound that letters make, your child will be interested in the letters and sounds in their name

- early reading and writing develop from your child playing "reader or writer" so have fun with marking things down and saying what they mean
- name the letters in words, initials, and from your child's writing

Understanding how stories work:

- read a book or tell a story to your child every day - use your voice with feeling to add interest and show quiet/loud talk, a higher pitched voice at the end of a sentence to ask a question, a pause to allow time to think about the story or picture
- stories model the grammar patterns in talk and new words (woodpecker) or concepts (*pointed*, *spotted*)
- tell your child stories about things that you have done together. This will provide opportunity for brain development through listening, thinking, visualizing (see things in the mind's eye), imagining, and understanding language
- share book reading with your child in a way that they play a part by talking about the pictures or asking questions and this shared time builds appreciation of the language in books and ways to talk about books (your child will enjoy shared book reading with an older brother or sister too)
- wordless picture books such as photo albums are fun to look at and talk together about
- re-tell your favourite part of the story or book

Playing and Pretending:

- play music to move, dance, and sing with your child, or to help them settle and be quiet
- have a regular time for active play together as well as quiet play time
- talk to your child during play to name and describe things and actions
- make an obstacle course from things around the house and move under, crawl over, go through/around and use the words that go with the actions
- add dolls, toy dishes and food, dress-up clothes to act out familiar actions and language in play
- add paper and things to write with during play so that your child uses scribbles and lists
- whenever possible, respond to your child when they come to you to play