



Ideas for Early Language Development

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IMITATION

Most of a child's early development is learned through imitation. Good role models are important for most aspects of development. This of course also applies to speech.

However, the imitation of small tongue or lip movements is quite a refined task. Before we can expect a child to imitate such delicate movements, it is easier to begin by expecting them to imitate more gross movements. This can include movements of larger parts of the body, such as the arms e.g. waving, clapping or placing your hands on your head, on your knees and perhaps finally on your mouth. This can then draw the child's attention to this area.

It is important that the sounds that you make are interesting and different both auditory and visually. If a little child is expected to hear and appreciate the difference between sounds like 't' and 'k', little progress will be made initially as these sounds are too similar.

It is better to use repetitive babble type patterns, such as 'mumumumum' which uses the lips, in contrast to an open mouth sound such as 'aaaaaaaaar'. Using different patterns of intonation within your babble holds the child's interest. It is also important to use lots of facial expression again to captivate the child's interest.

In normal speech and language development the child acquires babble patterns before he/she acquires the imitation of single isolated sounds.

SYMBOLIC DEVELOPMENT

Before a child can be expected to understand words, he has to be able to understand other symbols. Words, after all, are symbols for the objects/events, which they represent. They are highly abstract.

It is therefore important that a child is shown less abstract symbols, such as, a doll representing a baby, a toy chair representing a real chair etc. The progress through symbolic development should be taken from large doll materials down to small doll materials and finally pictures. Initially the more realistic a picture is e.g. a photograph, the easier it is for a child to understand. The more basic a picture is e.g. a few line drawing to represent an object, the more difficult it is for a child to understand what it represents.

It is important that a child not only understands what these symbols represent, but is also able to manipulate them through play. For example, when a child has miniature doll toys he or she should be encouraged to relate them, together in a meaningful sequence of play, for example, little boy getting out of bed, getting dressed, having his breakfast, going off to school etc.

Most of children's' early play reflects their own experience and will often relate to activities around the house. It is therefore important that boys are given the opportunity of playing with a doll or a teddy in order that they can carry out the same actions to that doll or teddy as are carried out to them or as they see being carried out to their siblings. Although many boys enjoy playing with trains and cars, there is less of an opportunity for them to extend this type of play into an elaborate sequence.

The type of sequences of play that I am referring to lend themselves very well to language development. It is very easy for a parent to sit with a child whilst they are engaged in play and comment on the type of activity in which the child is engaging. For example, "Ah, you are putting Mummy in the bed". "Mummy is sleeping". This type of commentary can extend throughout the whole sequence of play which offers an excellent language environment/stimulation for the child. The child will often start to use similar language structures whilst they themselves are playing. In other words, they have learned/acquired new language skills through a combination of play and hearing their parent's comments on it.

LANGUAGE STIMULATION

It is vital that children are spoken regularly. It is particularly vital that children with delayed/disordered speech and language are spoken to regularly even though the responses that an adult receives back from the child may give the impression that none of the language that the child has heard has been absorbed or understood.

In a 'normal cycle' of speech and language development a parent is rewarded for talking to their child by the child responding/reciprocating. With a child whose speech and language is delayed or disordered this circle of reinforcement often fails to get off the ground. The parent becomes demoralised/disenchanted with the child's lack of response and consequently ceases to speak to the child as much as they would have done had the child responded.

It is important to think, not just in terms of the quantity of frequency of language input given to a child, but also to think in terms of the quality. Very young children have limited auditory memory spans and can only retain short amounts of information in one go. It is therefore important to keep sentences short and to use relatively straightforward grammar. For example, one would not start talking to a very small child using the conditional tense. Language should be based on the 'here and now', in other words, it should reflect what the child is either doing, can see or can hear. There is little point in talking to a very young child about what they might do later or even what they have done in the past as often the child is unable to associate the words he is hearing with their referents.

Language should be information and interesting. If a child is constantly being asked questions, such as, "what is this?", they are not learning from the adult and it is not a natural form of communication.

People tend to concentrate a great deal on ensuring that a child has a good vocabulary. What is often not appreciated is that vocabulary consists not only of nouns, but also of verbs and other parts of speech. Please ensure that you use and help your child to acquire verbs as well as nouns. Sentences cannot be generated without verbs. It is very easy to comment on actions that one sees around you, such as people riding, running, walking, driving, as well as everyday activities around the house, such as, cooking, washing, sitting, standing, sleeping, dressing etc.

ATTENTION AND LISTENING SKILLS

It is important that a child's attention is gained before expecting them to listen/understand what you are saying to them.

A child's development of attention and listening skills will, may be, severely impaired if they are constantly exposed to a barrage of distracting sounds. The constant droning of the radio or television makes it difficult for a child to listen and to isolate relevant sound stimuli. This applies not just to language, but to other environmental sounds, such as, birds, aeroplanes, cars, etc. The development of a child's gross listening skills is the beginning of their development of understanding. A child will learn that the ring of a doorbell means that somebody has arrived. In other words, the sound of the bell is a symbol alerting the child to this fact. If they are unable to always hear the doorbell because of other background noise, it will take them longer to make this connection. This applies to every other sound.

We tend to live in a fairly noisy world. We have many appliances within the house, such as hoovers, washing machines, dishwashers, tumble dryers, microwaves, which all let off a noise which to a certain extent are unavoidable in this modern world. It is therefore important that noises which can be avoided, such as televisions, radios, records etc. should be minimised when a young child is in the house.

Parents should encourage their children to listen out for sounds, for example, when walking down the street with a child or pushing them in a pram; it is always possible to point out the source of various sounds, such as the bell of a bike, an aeroplane, the siren of a fire engine etc.

There are some very good games available commercially, in particular from The Early Learning Centre, which have tapes that play everyday noises, such as, home sounds, animal sounds, transport sounds etc. There are pictures that match the sounds and the child is expected to find the corresponding picture when a sound is played.

Listening activities can be devised using musical instruments/shakers whereby there are two of each particular sound maker. The parent plays one and the child is expected to listen and match it to their corresponding one. Initially this can be done through a combination of visual and auditory stimuli progressing on to using only the auditory channel (in other words, the parent plays their sound maker out of the child's range of vision so that he has to match it purely auditory).

As well as a child's listening skills being impaired with too many distracting sounds, a child's concentration can also be impaired. It is important that when a child is involved in a given task, he or she is not distracted by other activities. For example, if a child is being expected to complete a jigsaw puzzle, there should not be other toys around on the table to distract them, neither should there be the television on, which means that they are neither concentrating on the television nor on the puzzle with 100% of their concentration. If the child is being expected to watch television then he or she should be not be allowed to have access to toys at that time. This means the child will be giving 100% concentration to the television programme and when it is finished they should be completed, even if this means that the parents has to complete it with them. This encourages a child to settle and concentrate on a given activity rather than flitting from one thing to another.

COMPREHENSION

It is very easy for a parent to imagine that their child is understanding everything that is being said. In most cases, of course, this is true, but there are many children who have a good general intelligence but specific difficulties with language acquisition and understanding. These children are often very quick to pick up on external clues/cues to enable them to understand what is being said. For example, a child will very quickly learn to understand that when Mummy is running around the house getting things ready to go out, that she is likely to be asking the child at some point to put on their coat. Similarly at mealtimes the child may be asked regularly to go and wash their hands. The child may not understand the individual words but simply realises that when a particular phrase is said at this specific time, that that is what it means.

A child's comprehension can only accurately be assessed if there are no external cues or clues to help the child. This means that no gesture, eye pointing or situational cues should be available to the child at this time. There must also be alternatives to the words that have been spoken. For example, if a child is told "Give me your shoes" there must be a selection of other objects available for the child to choose from. If a child told to "Put Teddy to bed" there must also be another option, for example, a dolly and a bath in order for use to be sure that the child really did understand the words 'teddy' and 'bed'. Obviously I am not advocating that all language should be given in this way. This is purely for testing purposes.

Generally, language and understanding is acquired through a combination of situational clues and gesture. If your child is found to have specific difficulties with understanding then a gesture system may be advocated to use alongside spoken language to aid their comprehension.

BOOKS, TELEVISION, VIDEOS AND COMPUTERS

Most households now own all of the above. Whereas twenty or thirty years ago families would only have books, there is now a multitude of other 'stimulation' available for children. There are many excellent videos and television programmes around, but it is important that children are not left in front of them for too much of their young lives. Television and videos require little, if any, participation from the child and can encourage the child to become very passive. There is no communicative element involved. Although many parents may believe that their child can learn a lot of language from television, it is very much a 'one way' process in that the child is not expected to respond. In normal conversation if someone speaks to you, you reply and vice versa. This makes television an unnatural communication teacher.

Children are spending an increasing amount of time in front of repetitive videos. As with books, children tend to like something that is familiar and like to watch it again and again. This is often a sense of security that repetition brings to children, but in fact it can be fairly damaging. Many children are learning huge chunks of script from videos by hearing them repeated over and over again, but often fail to understand what the language means.

This can also occur if the same book is read too frequently.

It is best to use variety. If a child enjoys a particular book it is possible to try to alter the text by embellishing or using your own words to describe what is going on. In many cases with younger children, it is often more appropriate to use your own words rather than sticking exclusively to the text as this can make it more personal to an individual child's needs/experiences. It also prevents the child from becoming dependant upon hearing set phrases and thereby learning them and reproducing them parrot fashion without any real understanding of their meaning. It is also important that videos are not watched too frequently. Indeed it is best, if possible, to sit with your child when they are watching a video or a television programme so that you can make relevant comments about it to the child. Also when they are older it is possible to talk to them about the programme. This does not mean cross-examining them by bombarding them with lots of questions, but actually having a discussion, which involves participation from both parties.

It is becoming increasingly common for quite young children to be able to work/operate basic computer games. There is no harm at all in this if

the amount of time a child spends doing this is closely monitored. However, some children are becoming 'hooked' on computer games at a very young age. Computers offer virtually no 'normal' interactive process either verbally or non-verbally. It often encourages many children who have a tendency to isolate themselves from interaction with people, to cut themselves off completely.

To summarise, health language development involves a combination of listening skills, symbolic development, understanding language and the ability to formulate sentences by having a good basic vocabulary and knowing how to generate sentences through knowledge of syntax and grammar. It also involves a good development of social skills. These include turn taking, eye contact, appropriate facial and body posture and the understanding that communication is a two way process when a specific response is often required to a given set of language stimuli. The only effective way that these skills can really be taught is through everyday conversation about relevant topics in a natural setting, such as the home environment. It cannot effectively be taught through television and videos or any other medium. These other mediums may often supplement and can complement the everyday language stimulation, but cannot replace it.

VOCABULARY

It is said that a child needs to hear and practice using a word or a phrase in its context approximately seventeen times before this word/phrase is fully internalised. It is therefore important that new vocabulary is not just introduced in one context once or twice and the child is expected to have taken it on board. This is why it is so important that a child is given the opportunity to hear new words/phrases repeated in a variety of different contexts. Initially a child will focus on one aspect of the meaning/feature of a particular word. For example, if a very young child is being introduced to the word 'cup' they may initially think that it applies to any object with a handle. Later on they may come across cups without handles and then have to modify their understanding of this word to accept that it is a container that contains liquid. Subsequently, they may have to adapt this further to understand that it is not a container for liquids that has a spout but that it has to be a container within a certain size range with a rim and that it usually has a handle but may or may not. If you take this analogy, it is possible to see how words have to be heard in different contexts and different examples of a particular word must be available so that the child can acquire the full semantic knowledge of a word.

It is also useful to help your child to understand not just what a word on its own means, but now this word relates to other words. For example, a cow is not just a cow but it is also an animal. As a sub group of animals it is also a farm animal. Categorising tasks, whereby children are encouraged to sort pictures into appropriate groups depending on their function, where they may be found, their size and other attributes, is a very beneficial exercise. Even as adults when we go round museums we often learn that a particular item e.g. a crustacean, is a sub-group of an anthropoid. Categorising helps us to see how things fit into their correct places and it is also a very good way of storing information in a logical fashion. If information is stored logically it also improves memory as it enables us to retrieve facts more readily. Just as a neatly organised filing system means that we have ready access to a particular file, the same applies to storing information within our brains.

ENCOURAGING EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE

Many children with speech and language delay/disorder are very adept at finding for themselves, in other words, rather than asking for a biscuit, they will often be quite able to pull out a chair, climb on it and get the biscuit for themselves. They therefore learn many strategies to enable them to avoid speaking.

Many of these children are more highly developed in other areas of their development e.g. vision, than many of their peers. They will learn, for example, where things are kept, what belongs to whom and, in many cases, will even be more aware of their surroundings in order to compensate for the deficit in their linguistic knowledge. A child who cannot ask where he is going will probably have to work this out for himself. He will therefore be more aware of landmarks and this will help to give him a sense of security.

Of course, there are many things that a child with language difficulties cannot achieve, and when they are unable to compensate, either by their advanced visual skills or by other non-verbal communication means, such as gesture, they will often become very frustrated. Many children with speech and language difficulties are labelled as having behavioural problems. These are generally very much tied up with the fact that they can't communicate and often may not be able to understand fully what is being said to them, this of course causes them frustration. This must always be appreciated, but nevertheless can be very difficult to handle.

In order to encourage children to make their basic needs known verbally, it is often necessary to 'set the scene'. By this we mean that you set up a situation whereby the child cannot simply go and get the object, point to it, or use some alternative means of communication to get what they want. Examples of this would be:-

1. When dressing the child you omit a certain garment.
2. At the table you could forget to leave a spoon for them.
3. When completing a puzzle, a certain piece may be missing.
4. When talking to them in general you give them false alternatives e.g. "do you want milk or juice?". This means they cannot answer "yes" or "no".

Obviously in all these cases the child could simply go and get the items, but if you ensure that they are removed! It will encourage the child to try to explain what they mean. As a parent it is difficult, as it may appear that you are being rather cruel, but it can be handled in a fairly 'fun' way if you make a kind of joke of it. The child should be encouraged to try to voice at least one word that is relevant to the situation. If this is not forthcoming, you can of course give them the word and try to encourage them to repeat it after you or with you. It is not possible to force a child to say anything and it is important that a battle ground does not arise. It is also important that these kinds of situations are not put upon the child all the time, as this in itself will cause the child to be frustrated.

Generally, by thinking about the environment and the way in which you, as parents, formulate your own language, you can set situations which are more conducive to encouraging a child to speak. Simply asking the child yes/no type questions does not encourage them to produce words, or later on, even sentences.

SONGS AND NURSERY RHYMES

Parents often underestimate the value of these. However, we feel that these do play an important part in a young child's early development of speech and language. We would recommend that the more 'modern' action type rhymes are more suitable than many of the old fashioned rhymes which tend to use quite complex language which often bears no relationship to the child's world (therefore often making them fairly meaningless). If a child can be encouraged to carry out an action which represents the meaning of the rhyme, then this obviously helps their understanding.

Other advantages of nursery rhymes and songs are the benefits of increasing a child's auditory memory and sequencing skills as well as providing an early introduction to rhyme. The importance of rhyme in pre-literacy is often not fully appreciated. It is also a very beneficial skill for children who have pronunciation difficulties.

The only children we would recommend that rhymes are not used with too frequently are those that tend to 'echo' meaningless chunks of information, such as, excerpts from books or videos. It is important that these children are not exposed to too much repetitive language as this does not benefit their linguistic development.