



# EITI Newsletter

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## COMMUNICATION, LANGUAGE AND THINKING SKILLS: A PARTNERSHIP IN THE PRESCHOOL YEARS

Months before those long awaited first words are heard, babies are active communicators. By 8 months of age typically developing babies begin to communicate with a clear purpose, using "prelinguistic" gestures and vocalizations to indicate what they want. Babies are able to communicate for a variety of different purposes from indicating hunger to making you look at something of interest. Babies communicate feelings and a sense of wonder about the world.

In general babies and toddlers learn language within the context of interactions and conversations with caregivers. There are several key concepts in a developmental communication framework. One is the idea that language is a tool for controlling behavior, for interacting, and for learning. The process of language learning begins at birth. From the moment babies are born they are collecting information about sounds, words, and sentences and about the ideas and feelings that are being conveyed. The process is transactional, that is, there is an exchange of meanings and understandings that at first are not easy to appreciate, but are nonetheless crucial to how a baby learns about communication and language. Critical to language development are the interpretations of the caregivers. Early in their communicative development babies are not always very clear in how they are communicating, so it is very important that the caregivers are responsive to the baby's signals and respond as if the baby were being as clear and direct as could be. It is in this way that the baby begins to learn how the noises and movements he makes are interpreted by the grown-up who is caring for him. Communication develops from the infant and the caregiver sharing. They share emotions, attention to things and people around them, and they share intentions. Intentions are the purposes for which we communicate, what we mean or intend the other person to understand or do. Finally, the communication abilities that develop during infancy form the foundation for the language that will begin to emerge later on in the child's development.

What are the different ways in which babies can communicate their intentions to us? What are those intentions that babies can communicate? Knowing the answers to these questions will be important in

the caregiver's relationship as a communicative partner and help insure that the adult is very responsive to the baby. Being responsive to the baby's attempts to communicate will make for more powerful communication and language skills.

Before there are words, babies have a variety of means of communicating. They start with gestures at about 9 months of age. These are gestures in which the baby's hand comes in contact with an object or a person. The baby may give or show a toy or bottle to someone or she may push the adult's hand toward something that she wants. By about 11 months of age, the baby has a more refined kind of gesture. Now he can reach in the direction of something or someone. By 15 months he can point right at it. During this time babies make non-speech sounds such as laughing or crying, "raspberries" or cooing. Prior to the emergence of words babies can communicate a large number of intentions: seeking attention to themselves or something going on around them, requesting (objects or actions), greeting (waving "hi" or "bye"), sharing (giving the toy he was playing with), protesting or rejecting (pushing away a bowl of beets), responding and acknowledging (following a simple direction or smiling when spoken to) or even "informing" (pointing to a ball that has rolled under the couch). The sounds gradually become more refined so that they begin to resemble speech. Soon the gestures are accompanied by the first real word at about 13 months. Between 12 and 18 months new words are acquired slowly but children show an increase in their rate of communication. Now an increasing number of intentions can be conveyed. They use gestures and syllables and words to communicate their thoughts and desires. The children's language accomplishments increase the ease with which adults and other children can understand their attempts at communication.

Once the communication foundation has been solidified, language begins to grow at a steady rate. At about 18 months there is a surge in vocabulary growth from a word a week to several new words a day. Children begin to produce combinations of words that allow them to talk about more and more new ideas and relationships. Their conversational skills increase as well. They can begin to use words to request information, talk about events that have already happened or will happen in the future. From 9 months to 24 months children show rapid increases in the different ways they use to express their intentions and in their ability to participate in conversation.

Most 2 year olds can respond to a conversational partner. They can "chat" with you by taking turns in

conversation about something you are both interested in. Not only can they start a conversation and stay on a topic for a few turns, but they can also begin to change the subject! By age 3, children can have longer conversations and are better at taking turns. By kindergarten, children have generally learned all the basic rules for the different ways we use language socially. We no longer think about their language development once they are talking. Yet we should not forget that language is an important part of the preschooler's ability to think and learn in school.

Sometimes without even realizing it the caregivers in a child's life have played an enormously important role in developing the youngster's communication, language and thinking skills. Often the caregiver has just done "what comes naturally" - talking to the baby or toddler about the world around him and responding in an interested way to the facial expressions, gestures and noises that the baby makes in return. Chatting about what you are doing, whether it is changing a diaper, feeding stewed peas, folding the laundry or tickling a tummy and reacting to and interpreting the baby's response to your voice and face are essential parts of helping the child "learn the ropes" of communication and language.

Once the child enters a school-like environment, whether in day care or preschool, language and communication are even more essential. Language is not separate from the curriculum of a preschool. In fact, it is the "vehicle" by which thinking skills can be built. Undoubtedly, language in the classroom can be used to control behavior. It is very efficient as a management tool. Even more important for all the years of school that will follow, language is crucial to building cognitive skills. Language can be used in the classroom to help the children learn to think. It can be used to engage them in the process of thinking and communicating, not just acting and behaving. Thinking is something we want to encourage. There are certain behaviors in a classroom that can facilitate learning. We can use language in predictable ways to talk about experiences and ideas, to control the environment and to solve problems, either cognitive or social problems. Teaching children to use language to think and problem solve in the preschool lays a foundation for stronger language and thinking skills throughout their schooling.

Language can be a road map for thinking and interacting in the environment. It is interwoven into the curriculum. What are the different ways that children can do things with language? First, they can use language to tell what they know. They do this by labeling, greeting, informing (answering questions; telling facts; sharing experiences) and by orienting the people around them to what is of interest ("Hey, look what I have!"). Think of all the words that children can use to tell about size, space, time, positions, shape, color, texture, quantity, categories, same/different, etc. The vocabulary of the names of things, actions, places and feelings can increase until it is huge!

Children can be encouraged to use language to learn how to ask for what they do not have, do not know or do not want. Language can be used to make requests and to ask for help, information, objects, actions or behavior. Imagine some children in the block corner. It could happen that someone starts to throw blocks. The first instinct might be to pull that block from the hand of the child and say, "No!" for fear of the injury that could be caused. After reducing the danger, however, by adding, "Throwing blocks might hurt somebody, so don't throw blocks. Hitting hurts!" you have added the concepts of cause and effect and consequences of actions for the children. Language in the classroom can also be used for directing the behavior of others in non-physical ways ("Move, please!", "Gimme!", "I want \_\_\_"; "I need \_\_\_"). The adult can use language that helps the child control his own behavior, learn about sequence, and make choices as well ("You need to wait. After Michael's turn it will be your turn. What can you play with while he is playing?"). Using language for negotiating is another important way to use language to obtain what you want. Learning to negotiate ("You be the mommy and I'll be the daddy"; "When can I have a turn?") with words is an important social skill as well as a crucial learning skill. Negotiating helps children learn to create possibilities.

Finally, the preschool is an important place in which children learn how to use language for learning. We can encourage a lot of thinking by the questions that we ask children as we direct their attention and thought processes. Predicting can be encouraged by asking, "What if.." or "What do you think will happen next?" Another important thinking skill is comparing. Comparing can be facilitated by asking, "How are these the same?"; "How are they different?"; "Which one is the biggest, smallest, widest?" Similarly we can encourage the children to consider what is not the same and how and why things are different. Pretending and imagining are important in the preschool years because they are part of the way in which children work out problems and learn to think about things beyond the "here and now". Imagine a kitchen area that had no supplies. The children could create their own with paper, crayons and scissors! Pretending and imagining are important to developing later skills in reading comprehension and in creative writing.

Skill in communicating, using language and thinking are tools for success in a child. They are priceless gifts that can be provided free of charge to the children in our homes, classrooms and offices. The power of the caregiver is in understanding how early the process of learning starts, how much children know and can demonstrate if we as adults pay attention and are responsive, how crucial we are to the richness of a child's world and how easily we can learn to interact and talk in ways that are stimulating and invaluable to a developing mind.

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