



EITI Newsletter

Early Intervention Training Institute

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ENHANCING LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT IN EVERYDAY ACTIVITIES

We now know that at birth, an individual's genetic inheritance, that part which encodes the unvarying sequence of development, is only partially expressed. Only the basic wiring is in place. After birth, environmental factors predominate. During infancy and early childhood, the brain is waiting for instructions from the environment; its structure is being built on a daily basis.

It is well established that the prime language-learning years are birth to five. Language spoken to an infant from the first day of life has a profound impact on future language and thinking skills. By four days of age, the brain has already learned to focus on the sounds of its own language and to distinguish it from foreign phonemes. Research has proven that second language acquisition ability diminishes greatly after the age of five.

This suggests that there are critical and sensitive periods in which language stimulation will have optimal results. A baby's ability to think and use language conceptually has been found to relate to an enriched verbal environment. This does not mean that we should bombard a baby with stimulation, since stimulation needs to be attuned to a baby's developmental level and interest, and should occur within an interpersonal framework. In order to help the infant make the necessary associations and to encourage development of neural pathways, a sensitive caregiver responds to the baby's cues. She follows the baby's line of attention and provides a salient verbal cue to mediate, interpret, and organize for the child what he or she is experiencing. Growth in the early years is explosive and the connections made by children contribute to permanent connections in the brain.

Communication is as basic a human need as that for food and shelter. Language is the road map for thinking and interacting with the world. Children use language to tell you what they know, how they feel, and to ask for what they don't have, don't know, or want, and to learn. Every day brings hundreds of opportunities to enhance language and learning through the basic activities of life, as well as through play with other children. Play provides a medium for interaction and a venue for teaching. It is also fun. Talking to children is easy. It requires no preparation or clean up. Listening is sometimes harder, and caregivers have to remind themselves that in teaching a child to converse they have to demonstrate the good listening skills they want to teach.

0-6 months

1. **Diaper Changing** is an excellent opportunity for back and forth, face to face interaction. Babies are eager to communicate and some will vocalize displeasure at being confined. Use this time to imitate and respond to their sounds. Very quickly, you will find they will respond and a "conversation" has begun.
2. **Feedings** are social times. Use feeding as an occasion to help babies to signal anticipation, the desire for more, and when sated. Even a 6-month-old can use eye gaze, vocalization, and gesture to indicate important ideas.
3. **Mirrors** help a baby to recognize herself as separate from a caregiver. Teaching body parts assists the child in creating an identity and introduces important vocabulary.

6-12 months

1. **Peek-A-Boo** is a most wonderful game for teaching conversational turn-taking and cause and effect. It helps children to accommodate separation in a structured, safe, interaction.
2. **Stacking Blocks** provides an opportunity to teach early-developing spatial terms such as *up* and *down*.
3. **Cause and Effect Toys** that spin, pop up, and make noise at the push of a button, turn of a wheel, or spin of a dial offer the opportunity to learn that "if I act, it will happen." This is a crucial precursor to "if I talk, people will respond to my need."
4. **Board Books** offer excellent opportunities for labeling vocabulary, learning to attend to specific items, and introducing pre-literacy skills such as page-turning and left-to-right orientation. Using photographs is a great way to create a very personal book of important people, favorite toys, and other objects. The activity builds self-esteem as baby begins to catalogue caregivers, family, and friends.
5. **Walks in the Stroller** can be wonderful times for caregivers to talk about what the baby is seeing and hearing on the streets or in the park. Being attentive to where the baby is looking will help you know what is on her mind, and, therefore, which label will be the most reinforcing.

12-18 months

1. **Push and Pull Toys** are great for teaching early developing single concepts such as *push*, *pull*, *stop* and *go*.
2. **Pop-Up Toys** are a chance to continue working on cause and effect, and to introduce simple questions such as "Where's the doggie?" They are also helpful in teaching politeness markers such as "Hi, doggie, bye, doggie."

3. **Bubbles** are magical and almost all children love them. Most children will be motivated to shout, “pop” as they lunge and dive at bubbles. Offering them an opportunity to *dip* and *blow* is another great way to teach vocabulary in a fun and motivating way.
4. **Walks in the Park** with toddlers can be an incredible learning experience if you are willing to walk at their pace, stop when they stop, crouch when they crouch, and explore the things that catch their attention. An inch-worm hanging from a tree, a pile of leaves, a truck in the road; take your time, walk along and ask questions about what you see. It can also be a time to teach “stop!”, “wait for me!” and “come back to Mommy”.

18-24 months

1. **Climbing Toys and Slides** are marvelous for teaching spatial terms such as *up, down, in, on, under, behind,* and *in front of*. When friends are present, it is also a chance to teach turn-taking and patience as another child takes a turn climbing up and sliding down.
2. **Puzzles** are another opportunity to learn vocabulary. They come in all shapes, most with themes of early childhood interest such as foods, animals, or vehicles.
3. **Dollhouses and Figures** represent real life and are wonderful at all ages. Acting out activities like eating, sleeping, and playing, while learning the names and places of household furniture, is excellent for categorization, early-developing personal narratives, and overall vocabulary development. Reenactment with an alternate ending can offer an opportunity for children to work out events that may have been troubling.
4. **Sand Box Play** is another vocabulary builder, as well as a chance to learn about substance and textures. Sand boxes offer a wonderful way to learn words such as *dump, full, pour, spill, measure, empty,* and *full*.
5. **Books:** Read, read, read! Literacy is the window to lifelong learning. Developing a love of books is one of a caregiver’s most important roles. Reading with children provides an opportunity to talk about, name, and point to pictured objects. Little by little, they will begin to follow simple plots and be able to repeat lines as they hear favorite stories again and again. Remember that although it may be boring for you to read the stories over and over, repetition is a toddler’s key to mastery.

2 years

1. **Legos** are another excellent way to teach prepositional phrases such as *on top of, under,* and *in front of*. They are great toys for teaching similarities and differences, and for building creative planning and executing skills.
2. **Mr. Potato Head** is an old favorite for teaching body and facial parts. Great for pretend play, as well.
3. **Cooking Sets with Foods, Baby Dolls and Equipment, Cars and Trucks** provide wonderful opportunities to act out activities of daily life. In each activity, you will be developing abstract thinking (“What should we do with these?”), vocabulary, and narrative abilities. They are also a

great vehicle to talk about sharing and feelings.

4. **Shopping Trips** can be language learning experiences with very little effort on the part of the caregiver. Before going, open the refrigerator and cupboards and let the children help you decide what you need. Give children a list (with pictures) so they can shop along side you. Try finding pictures of common foods in magazines and pasting them on cards. Children can use the cards to search for products and help you load the basket. Cards can be reused week after week.

3 years

1. **Simple Arts and Crafts** area great occasion to get messy, and to learn about colors, shapes, sizes, and textures. Be sure to allow plenty of experimentation and to avoid having a perfectly constructed model to follow. The key is the process, not the final project.
2. **Representational Toys: Dress-up, Cooking Sets, and Vehicles** are a great way to practice real language that is useful both in play and in the world at large. Providing children with toys that represent everyday tasks they experience and watch their parents experience creates opportunities to play out ideas and to take on roles.
3. **Puppets** are a wonderful way to remove some of the stress for “reluctant” talkers. They are also a great way to learn role-taking and how to take on the perspective of someone else. This is a very important skill for narrative development, understanding literature, and healthy human interaction.
4. **Playdough** is a wonderfully creative material. Help children to feel free to create anything they choose and then give them plenty of opportunity to describe their creations. You can help with more specific terminology. Just be sure you are really listening to their intent so as not to supplant their ideas with your own.

4-5 years

1. **Rhyming Games.** Four year olds love to rhyme and play with words. Try rhyming simple words such as *fat cat* and then moving to more complex rhymes involving their names. When they get really good at it the “Name Game” is fun to sing. Rhyming is an important skill which increases phonemic awareness and is a building block for future literacy.
2. **Conversation.** Talk, talk, talk, and listen. Conversation with a four year old is essential. Besides being an important linguistic skill, quiet conversation is an excellent way to discover wonderful things about your child. A child of four should be able to hold a conversation for four turns. Each turn involves the child and the caregiver. Your child should be able to tell you about things that happen when you aren’t there and should be able to talk about what you are talking about.
3. **Trains** are great for increasing vocabulary, encouraging cooperative play and creative problem solving. Naming each of the cars, offering multiple solutions for how to set up tracks and create interesting environments is one way you can participate.
4. **Musical Instruments** are great at any age. Fours will love making their own instruments, learning to follow a sequence of instructions and coming up with a

working set of castanets or tambourine. They will love to create a band and play along to tapes. While doing so they will learn about sequencing, add to their vocabularies and improve their listening skills.

5. **Dolls**, as noted earlier, are terrific for learning to take on a role, act out ideas and experiences and ultimately create and tell personal narratives. These activities will add to feelings of mastery and control and will therefore increase self-esteem.
6. **Water Play** is a time to experiment with texture, substance and mess. It's a wonderful vocabulary builder and like many of the more sensory oriented materials is great for encouraging reluctant talkers. They're having so much fun, they forget to be self-conscious.
7. **Blocks** are a terrific toy for all purposes. They build vocabulary, math, science and creative skills. They're wonderful for group play and teaching cooperation.

A child's ordinary routines and usual playtime provide many opportunities for enhancing his/her language development. Caregivers who use these opportunities help the child to become a more effective and successful communicator.

Nancy Tarshis, M.A., CCC/SLP

A GROUP FOR PARENTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN WITH SPEECH AND LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

The Children's Evaluation and Rehabilitation Center has a team of staff based at the new Children's Hospital at Montefiore. The team provides a weekly support group for parents of preschool children with speech-language impairments. The group meets while preschoolers attend group speech therapy down the hall. Group size usually ranges from three to five members. Participants struggle with the common stressors of poverty, lack of paternal involvement in parenting, and often, feelings of isolation as the parent of a child with speech-language impairments.

In the group, parents (and occasionally a grandparent) address developmental concerns and behavioral problems in their children. The informal, supportive nature of the group has led to discussions concerning family relationships and mothers' attempts to balance their own needs with the needs of their speech-impaired children. Issues of separation are also addressed in the

speech therapy/support group settings, as the speech group is often the first peer social experience for the preschoolers away from their parents.

Parent group work helps parents develop a better understanding of their children's speech and language problems and may lead to better understanding of broader parenting issues. For example, a young girl receiving speech therapy was noted to have hypertonic jaw musculature, to be inhibited in speech production, and to bite her clothing. Upon meeting the child, the clinician leading the parent group noticed the child's wide-eyed facial expression and tight jaw which are consistent with anxiety disorders. In the group, the child's mother began to discuss the use of physical discipline with her children, and complained that her daughter was now threatening to beat other children with a belt. While the mother denied physical abuse of her child, it seemed that her child's anxiety (related to threats of physical discipline) was inhibiting speech production in the presence of unfamiliar adults. The group setting allowed a larger picture of the mother's parenting to emerge, including her concern that her older son was saying that he did not love her. Group discussion of the child's communication problems made it possible to address relevant but sensitive parenting issues.

There are often concerns among parents about how their child with speech-language problems will manage when he or she begins formal preschool. Questions are often raised about how other children will react to their child, as well as how their child will manage without a "translator". The group provides guidance on how the parent can handle these situations, and makes suggestions about activities that help the child practice the needed skills.

An additional benefit of this kind of group work concerns the fact that, while often some area of parenting is problematic for each parent, it seems that each parent has some area of success or "expertise" to share with the group. This leads to more self-confidence about parenting abilities, with an increased ability to persevere through difficulty. Also, women who initially profess the lack of any supportive individual in their lives have "graduated" from the group when their children entered full-time preschools, having formed a friendship with another mother. The women continue to arrange play experiences for their children, and help each other continue to find resources for their families.

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