
ACTIVITIES FOR SPEECH / LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT



The Power of Parents

You may not realize it, but you have the natural ability to help your child learn the skills necessary for speech/language development. This pamphlet offers ideas/activities you can do at home with your child to accomplish just that.

SKILLS

Joint Attention/Reference

Focused attention on each other or an external object through talk.

Object Permanence

Realization that objects out of view are still physically present.

Speech Sounds

Symbolic verbalization used as the building blocks for spoken words.

Spoken Words

Verbalization of combined speech sounds to represent something else.

Sentences

Expression of words to convey a message.

Narratives

Culturally dependent discourse used to express a story or complex event.

Language

Language is a symbolic system used to exchange messages between people and the world. All language systems are made up of symbols, meaning, and use. Symbols are the sounds, words, and/or gestures we use to convey the message. Meaning is the understanding of the message or symbol, and use is the function or purpose of the message.

Each one of these language components are dependent upon each other for good communication. This pamphlet will give you six key skill areas to work on that will strengthen your child's symbols, meaning, and use of language for the rest of her life.

Getting Started

Language development begins at infancy, so let's get started! Just select the skill area and level appropriate to your child and have fun!

Speech Tree

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Joint Attention/Reference

Joint attention/reference refers to focused attention on each other or an external object through talk initiated by the caregiver during routines and games. You help your baby gain this skill every time you quickly respond to her crying. Your baby needs to feel loved and cared for, and she will naturally attend to those who come to her aid. Talk with your baby. Talking will help her learn the sounds of language and associate your voice with your face. Holding your baby will not only assist with bonding but it will help develop sensory perception: things to see, smell, and touch. Purchase or make a mobile, use a mirror, play music, go for walks, and give your baby a massage.

As your baby grows, she will continue to develop attention skills vital to communication. You can help develop these attention skills through her childhood by maintaining good eye contact during conversation, reading books together, and bending down to the level of your child while talking. Continue to help your child develop advanced attention skills right into her teenage years by doing tasks or activities together, such as homework, community outings, chores, and board games.

Object Permanence

Object Permanence is a skill needed for language development. It is said to emerge when your baby begins to realize that objects out of view are still physically present. This important cognitive skill allows her to associate a word with an object, and talk or understand something without it being visually present. You can help your baby develop object permanence by introducing her to bright colored toys. Move the toy in front of the baby while saying “look”, then make it disappear and reappear. Also, clasp your baby’s hands in front of her face, then slowly pull them apart. Your baby will watch this movement. Try placing the baby’s rattle in her right hand and shake it, then repeat using alternating hands.

As your baby grows, she will continue to develop object permanence. You can help strengthen and develop this important skill through her childhood by playing “peek-a-boo” games, or “find it” games. But don’t stop there, continue to help your child strengthen this skills all the way through her elementary years. For example, you could create a “mystery box” out of an large shoe box. Place several desirable sensory items into the box. Cut a hole large enough to insert her hand and arm so that items may be felt, but not seen. Then without looking have her touch one object to describe what it feels like and guess the object is.

Speech Sounds

Help your infant learn speech sounds by talking to her during regular routines throughout the day. A study by Jusczyk & Nelson in 1996 (as cited in Bernthal and Bankson, 2004), showed that babies are sensitive to intonation and word string patterns by 6 months of age, so even lengthy conversations and singing will assist with language development. Also, it's never too early to start reading to your baby. As your child grows older, encourage vocalization of animal sounds. This helps her learn to control the vocal folds (the primary muscle used for voicing of speech). Also, encourage your child to use words along with pointing when requesting objects. Most of all, remember to model clear speech, and slow down your rate of speech when reading books together or singing songs.

If your child is very difficult to understand, try teaching her functional words on a weekly basis. These functional words will provide your child with a means for attention (look, watch me, hey, more), acceptance or refusal (yes, no, want), self help (potty, wash, brush), social (please, thank you), location (over, there, here, up), emotional words (love, hate), and family words (name of siblings, mommy, daddy). When teaching words, target 5 per week providing a clear model at least twice a day to your child without placing any demands on her. After a week, select one sound to work on within the modeled words (for example, the /k/). Then ask her to say the word following your model. Listen for the sound within each word. If the child says the word incorrectly, but the target sound within the word is correct, do not correct her. In other words, be sure to correct only those sounds which you are targeting to improve.

Be a good listener by ignoring your child's errors, and encouraging her to gain confidence in speaking. Fight ear infections. If all else fails, seek outside speech therapy, especially if your child is not at least 50% understood by the age of 3.

Words

A child's first words are typically items or people located within her environment. It isn't until the child is about two years old that she begins to understand basic concepts. Early developed concepts may include in/out, open/closed. By the time your child is three or four she continues to learn more abstract concepts such as front, back, around, next to, etc. You can help your child learn concepts by pairing movement with learning. For example, have your child crawl under the table or chair, go through a tunnel, jump over a book, step in and out of a box, or crawl between two teddy bears. Games such as Hokey-Pokey help your older child learn her right and left. Numbers can be learned by counting stairs, jumping, throwing bean bags, or counting candy. Colors may be learned through association, such as "yellow like a banana", "green like the grass", and "red like an apple". Sensory words can be easily introduced which offer your child descriptive abilities. Books such as Pat the Bunny are great for this. As your child gets older you may ask the following questions to elicit more descriptive language: "What do you see/hear?" and "How does it smell/taste/feel?"

Sentences

Expansion is an easy method to use that helps your child develop sentence structures. A two year old will usually begin to link two words together (for example, doggy bark). This phrase can be expanded to “Yes, the dog is barking”. This will help your child build smaller abstract words (such as “is”) into her sentences down the road.

By the time a child is 2 year of age, she should be starting to ask “what” questions. Carrier phrases used in I Spy books provide good models for correct sentence and question forms (“I spy with my little eye ... a red, round, fruit.”; or “What is ... red, round, and a fruit?”). As your child grows older, try playing different games to show how the meaning of a sentence can change based on the order of words. For example, “The dog was bitten by the girl.”, or “The girl was bitten by the dog.”.

Narratives

Narratives are the most complex forms of language and are entirely culturally dependent. Children develop narratives in a sequential fashion just like any other aspect of language. By 2 years of age the child is able to understand and talk of past events or objects not seen, a critical skill to developing narratives. The first narrative form is usually about small childhood problems such as a fall, or a pet injury. Other emerging forms may sound like a series of random descriptions. “Primitive narratives” appear around 4 years of age, which sound more like a true story using a logical sequence of events surrounding one theme.



Playing with your child helps develops narrative structures, as reported by Cullatat, 1994 (as reported in Nelson, 1998).

As your child grows older you can continue to help develop narrative skills through activities such as scrap booking, go to the library on a regular basis, see plays together, get involved in a book or drama club, or just talk about a recent movie.

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