

BUILDING A LOVING, LEARNING AND LANGUAGE RICH ENVIRONMENT THROUGH PLAY AND POSITIVE DAILY INTERACTION

Building a language rich environment is, on the face of it, an easy thing to do. Unfortunately, in today's busy households and with the busy lifestyles of parents who have to work full-time, it is harder to find the time to spend with your children than many of us realise. However, there are many opportunities to use and teach language in everyday situations and create a good environment for learning.

MAKE TIME FOR YOUR CHILDREN!

Children learn speech and language through listening, watching, exploring, copying, initiating, responding, playing and interacting with others. For those first few years most of the important interaction is going to be between the child and their parents, carers and maybe siblings. Finding time to spend with your children and have a shared focus is very important if you want to help them to develop their speech, language and social skills. One-to-one time will benefit your child in the long term.

You are doing your child a disservice if you have spare time, but put them in front of the TV. There are a few (and only a few!!) children's TV programs that are in any way educational. Your child is more likely to learn about things from one-to-one playtime with his parent or carer. TV and video games are passive entertainment and do not encourage any interaction. Studies now show that children who watch too much TV in their early years are more likely to have difficulties with attention and listening when they reach school age.

There is also evidence to show that if a child uses a dummy their speech can be delayed. Speech can be delayed because the child is not speaking, and because the development of the child's oral musculature may be affected by the constant sucking of a dummy.

BUILDING AN ENVIRONMENT THAT HELPS LANGUAGE FLOURISH

Building a language rich environment is about using every opportunity to use language, to interact, to share a focus, to talk, to take turns. Building a language rich environment is also about building a nurturing environment, giving your child love and affection and building their self-confidence. And finally, it is about building a learning environment, creating a place where love, language and learning can all take place together.

So what do you do to create this environment? Well first look at yourself and how you are communicating:

REMEMBER YOUR LANGUAGE LEVEL

One of the biggest things to be aware of when using language around your young child is the level and complexity of the language you use. Think about their age and how much language they use. A young child will generally understand more words than he uses in speech. You can use the milestones charts in this folder to have a broad idea of your child's language level.

Assuming your child is developing along normal lines think about the level of your language. For

instance, if your child is aged 2 years and 6 months and is able to follow a short instruction containing 2 key words, be mindful of this when you talk to her. If you use long sentences she will not understand you. If your child does have difficulty understanding, just use key words, more intonation, and gesture, or point as you say the words.

When talking to your child, try to talk about things that are in context or that he can see, so he can use these things as a reference. Talk slowly and put emphasis on the key words if they are in a sentence, and use lots of intonation to help emphasise meaning. Give your child more time to respond than you would with older children or an adult. Younger children may need a little longer to process your speech and think of an answer of their own. This is even more important if your child has difficulties acquiring language. If your child has language difficulties, or receptive language delay, limiting your words, giving him lots of time to process language, and using lots of gesture is essential.

Here are 2 examples of how the same instruction can be given. Mum is giving an instruction to her 2 ½ year old son called Ben.

Example 1: Mum is doing something and not looking at her son: *“Honey, can you get your coat and shoes, we're going out to the shops”*

or alternatively:

Example 2: Mum looks at Ben (emphasises the words in bold): *“ Ben.....get your **shoes** (points to shoes)....good boy.....and your **coat** (points to coat)....well done.....we're going to the **shops**”*.

TAKE A STEP BACK AND ADD IN LANGUAGE

You can enhance your child's development of language by sometimes taking a step back during play and letting them take the lead. This gives your child control of their environment and builds their confidence. Although you are still involved in the play you are not dictating what is happening. However, you can still be feeding or adding language into the play as it is happening. So the takeaway here is not to feel you have to fill in any gaps of silence, just watch and listen and add language. For instance, if your daughter is playing with her dolls, just watch, add language to her words and dictate some of her actions.

Chloe: Dolly tea

Mum: The dolly's drinking tea and that one is having a sandwich

Chloe: Sandwich

Mum: Smm sandwich. What's it got in it...jam. A jam sandwich mmm.

Chloe: Mmmm sandwich

Mum: Mmmmm jam sandwich yummy

Chloe: More tea

Mum: More tea for dolly and teddy is drinking tea too.

Chloe: Cake.

Mum: Oooh, are they getting cake too? Yummy.

Chloe: Yummy cake.

Mum: Yum yum yum. Eating lots of cake (rubs tummy).

This is a simple example and although mum is only adding a few new words, she is acknowledging her daughter's words and she is expanding on her sentences. Chloe can hear her

words being put into longer, more grammatical sentences and a couple of verbs are added (eating and drinking). Chloe remains in charge throughout the game. She leads the game and dictates what is happening. This situation allows her control so there is no pressure on her to communicate and the communication environment is a relaxed and nurturing place.

THE LANGUAGE YOU USE DURING PLAY

Children do not learn language by having an adult continually asking them to name various items. Children learn by hearing words and linking them to things. So it is a good idea to add language into play, rather than asking your child to name every toy they are playing with. Adding language is an easy thing to do and can be done in all types of different situations, not just play. You can comment on what your child sees, commentate on what he is doing, or expand on what he has said e.g.

Child: *Car*

Adult: *That's right. It's a car. A fast car.*

or

Adult: *That's right. It's a car. A red car. And there is a blue car.*

Child: *Cat*

Adult: (gesture the actions, and emphasise the key words *cat* and *climbing*).

The other way to add language is to describe what your child is doing during play. For instance, if your daughter is playing with her dolls in the dolls house, give a little commentary:

Jane: *Dolly*

Dad: *Dolly's going in the house.*

Jane: *Sit*

Dad: *Dolly's sitting down.*

Jane: *Drink*

Dad: *Dolly's got a cup, she is drinking tea.*

Jane: *Drink tea*

Dad: *Yes, dolly is drinking tea... and now she is eating cake.*

The temptation here is to ask a question, such as “*What is dolly doing?*” or “*What is dolly drinking?*” This immediately puts the emphasis on your child, and they then have to stop their play and respond. By just commenting, you are not putting any pressure on your child to communicate so the play is more relaxed. Your child is also able to play on her own terms and control the game.

HAVING A SHARED FOCUS

The above examples show the importance of having a shared focus. This is important because not only are you giving your child a point of reference when you talk about things, but she is learning, listening and using attention skills. These skills are vitally important for your child when she attends school. The early years are key years for developing these skills.

Studies are showing that too much passive television viewing in the early years of life can affect the listening and attention skills of children when they reach school age. The best ways to develop skills is to spend time with your child, talk and play with her and have a shared focus.

Try and develop a shared focus with your child whenever you are talking to her. Share the moment and look at things together. Make sure you are at your child's level and have good eye contact. It is important to notice what interests your child and what she is focussing on, and then comment on it. This helps create a shared focus, shows your child that you are interested and allows her to link language to the things she is looking at when you comment.

Also make sure you listen to your child's vocalisations or attempts at speech and try and translate them. If you are able to acknowledge and understand your child's attempts at speech it encourages them to attempt more. And at the same time, you are providing a good model of the speech. If you can't understand your child, repeat back her word and point to things you think she may be trying to say.

Most daily activities can involve a shared focus:

- **Shopping:** Tell your child what item you are looking for. That way you can turn your attention to the items on the shelves and name some of them. You can name them for your child, if she does not recognise them.
- **Reading books:** This is an excellent way to have a shared focus. Look at the book, talk about the pictures and read the story.
- **Cooking:** Make a cake together. Talk about the ingredients and what you are doing (stirring, mixing, pouring etc). Follow a recipe step by step (sequencing skills).
- **Toys:** Have a tea party with your daughter and her dolls. Describe what everyone is doing (but don't ask questions. Let your daughter take the lead). Do the voices for some of the dolls and add language that way.

PRETEND PLAY

Pretend play is another great way to develop your child's imagination and add lots of language at the same time. Letting your child lead the game also gives them a sense of control and can build self-confidence. Here is an example of how a dad and his son pretend to be firemen and all the different ways that this can be educational for the child (see below). We will also give you some other examples.

Example 1 – Firemen

You are a dad and you have 15 minutes to spend with your 4-year old son. You decide to be firemen and imagine that you have got a call to put out a fire in a big building.

- Firstly let's think about the **Language** we will be using:
Nouns - fire, fireman, hat, boots, hose, water, fire engine, smoke, ladder
Verbs - drive, climb, run, jump, smell
Adjectives - hot, wet
Prepositions - in front, in, on
- **Social skills:** Turn-taking and shared focus
- **Self confidence:** Let your son be the chief fireman, let him give you the orders
- **Affection:** Give him a hug to celebrate when you put the fire out and save all the people.

How easy was that!! This is just one short simple little role play where a boy is playing, learning, listening and using language, building social skills, building self confidence, and bonding with his dad. Dad only needed 15 minutes out of his day to do it. It is not hard. You can do it in short bursts when you have little pieces of time.

Example 2. Rally Driver

Put 2 chairs next to each other and you can pretend to be rally drivers.

- **Language used:**
Nouns - car, race, steering wheel, brakes, helmet etc
Verbs - stop, go skid, crash etc
Adjectives - fast, slow, up, down etc
Prepositions - in front, under, over, on etc
- **Social skills:** Turn-taking and shared focus
- **Self confidence:** Let your son/daughter drive the car and give the orders

Example 3. Dress up for the ball

Have a dress-up with your daughter and imagine you are going to a ball.

- **Language used:**
Nouns - dress, shoes, ball, make-up, hair etc
Verbs - dress, dance, fasten etc
Adjectives - pretty, elegant etc
Prepositions - on, in, under etc
- **Social skills:** A shared focus, talking about the ball

These are simple examples and with a bit of imagination could be expanded in all sorts of ways, but it illustrates that it is easy to create playtime situations, that are fun and also can be used to positively promote speech and language skills, social skills and build confidence.

BODY LANGUAGE AND USING GESTURE

Try to use body language and gesture when you speak. This helps your child understand what you are saying and may also teach him to do the same so that he can make himself understood more effectively. Body language plays a huge part in helping others gain meaning from what we say. This is a good skill for children to learn, especially if their speech is not clear in the early years.

ASKING QUESTIONS

Children are inquisitive and it is important to always take the time to answer their questions. Answering questions creates a 2-way communication process, because you both have a turn and you both have to wait and use good listening skills. Sometimes children go through a phase of asking "why" in response to everything you say. If this becomes a habit (rather than a genuine question), respond with your answer and then ask them a question. This creates a turn-taking opportunity and at the same time making the child to respond to a question.

If you want your children to learn language and develop speech and social skills -
TURN OFF THE TV AND TALK TO THEM AND PLAY WITH THEM!

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For more information on child development, and activities to develop speech and language skills visit

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