

Assisting The Speech And Language Development In Young Children – What You Can Do To Help?

Francesca Bierens

Christchurch College of Teacher Education, New Zealand.

**For reprint and all correspondence: Francesca Bierens, Speech-Language Therapist and Trained Primary School Teacher, Christchurch College of Teacher Education, New Zealand.*

INTRODUCTION

It is very easy to take the development of a child's speech and language for granted and often it is only when a child does not begin to talk that we suspect there is a problem. However the skills required for the development of intelligible speech and functional language begin to develop long before then.

The development of language and clear, intelligible speech is extremely complex and requires the child to acquire many individual skills before they can communicate effectively.

1. What are the skills a child needs to learn in order to communicate effectively?

- a. Firstly the child needs to acquire the pre-verbal skills of language. These skills provide the foundation for language development and if a child has not acquired any one of these skills or has difficulty using any of these skills consistently, then their speech and /or language development will be affected to some degree.

The pre-verbal skills are;

- Eye contact
- Attention and concentration
- Visual awareness
- Auditory awareness
- Imitation of actions
- Imitation of sounds
- Turn taking and interaction
- Awareness and control of the face and mouth

- b. The child also needs to be able to understand what is said to them. This is Receptive Language.

- c. The child needs to be able to communicate either verbally (using words – referred to as 'verbal language') or by facial expressions, body language, gesture and developing the ability to express his own needs and wants in an interactive manner. This is Expressive Language.

- d. The child also needs to be able to correctly form speech sounds allowing spoken words to be clearly understood by the listener (this is naturally dependent on age.) Intelligible Speech is therefore also essential for effective communication.

- e. It is also essential to remember that the child needs to have an:

- Opportunity to communicate and a
- Desire to communicate

2. If the child is not talking, what should you do first?

If a child is not talking at the appropriate time or does not appear to be able to understand or communicate adequately for their age, it is initially necessary to determine possible reasons as to why the child's speech and language skills are not developing as expected.

The first things to do are:

- a. Have the child's hearing checked. Not just a screening but a full assessment if possible. It is common for hearing tests to be inconclusive in preschoolers as it is difficult to be certain of the reliability of their responses. However it will let you know if there is a problem. It is also useful for knowing if the hearing in one ear is better than the other. This is important for teaching purposes and for seating positions, i.e. making sure the parent or teacher is seated on the side of the 'good' ear.

- b. Have the child's vision checked.

- c. Spend time with the child in a variety of situations. Observe the child at play on his own and with other children where possible, then gradually join in the game and engage the child yourself in a variety of activities. By doing this, it is possible to determine which of the pre-verbal skills the child has acquired, what skills are emerging spontaneously or with guidance

and encouragement and which skills are absent. It is also an excellent time to determine the child's areas of interest and strength.

3. How can you encourage a child's language development?

Always keep the pre-verbal skills in your mind when playing with the child and assist parents to do so as well. Always be aware of the purpose of the activity. It is not usually the activity but the way in which it is presented that makes it effective for assisting a child's language development. It is therefore not necessary to spend large amounts of money on expensive toys.

Eye contact / Facial Regard is important because it is an indication that the child is attending to the person speaking. It is also necessary in order for the child to learn to identify various facial expressions and to learn how to form speech sounds.

Note:

- Never physically turn the child's head towards the speaker.
- Some children use their 'peripheral' vision i.e. looking from the side. Looking at you face to face and establishing direct eye contact is not possible for them. As long as the child is attending in your direction, this is perfectly acceptable.

In order to encourage a child's facial regard;

1. Always call your child by name and wait until they have stopped what they were doing and are either looking at you or in your direction before you ask a question or give an instruction.
2. Use a favourite toy or object of interest and hold the toy up in front of the child's face, (not too close) and slowly move the toy around to your face so that the child 'eye follows' the toy to look at you.

Attention and concentration are essential in order for a child to be able to focus and learn from the activities they are attending to.

1. Make sure the child is comfortable.
2. Turn off all distracting noises such as the television, computer. The room should be as quiet as naturally possible.
3. Avoid visual distractions that may take the child's attention.
4. Do not finish the activity when the child wants to. It is not necessary to complete an activity but extend it slightly longer than

the child wishes, such as telling the child there is 'one more piece' if doing a puzzle, or 'one more page' if reading a book'.

Visual Awareness and Auditory awareness are important because a child must first be aware of what is going on around him before he can learn about them.

Visual:

1. Point out objects and different actions taking place while you are out shopping.
2. Point out items around the house and encourage your child to look at them - look for favourite objects; find where the cat is sleeping.
3. Look through books and point to various objects within the book.

Auditory:

1. Identify sounds of objects around the house, e.g. telephone.
2. Identify sounds outside, e.g. dog barking, cars, trucks.
3. Sing - rhymes and little songs

Imitation of actions and sounds are important because they provide the child with the knowledge and some degree of understanding of a skill which then allows them to make their own attempts.

1. Dance and encourage the child to copy your 'moves' then again you copy hers.
2. Play 'pretend games' such as 'sweeping the house', 'pretending to be asleep' and encourage the child to imitate.
3. Encourage the child to imitate facial expressions. Make a game out of it, so that the child initially copies your expression, then you copy her expression. Make exaggerated faces, such as happy, angry, silly. This can be fun when played in front of the mirror.
4. Encourage the child to imitate simple animal sounds, e.g. Have a toy 'cat'; 'sheep'; and 'cow' to begin with. Always prolong the sound slightly, e.g. Meeaaouww; baaaah; mmoouuu. Sing 'Old MacDonald Had a Farm'.

Turn taking and interaction skills provide the basis for interactive communication.

1. Push a toy car, truck or ball to the child. Encourage him to wait a short distance from you until you have pushed the car to him. Let him have a little play with the car, but then encourage him to roll it back to you. If necessary have another adult seated behind him to gently guide his

- hands and assist him to push the car back to you.
2. Take turns putting the pieces into a jigsaw puzzle. Keep control of the pieces yourself and pass each piece to your child when it is his turn. Do not use one of the child's favourite puzzles that he likes to do himself.
 3. Do some drawing activities using only one pen, so that the child has to wait until you have drawn a shape or line, before he is given the pen to either imitate your drawing or create his own drawing.
 4. Encourage the child to take control of the turn-taking and interaction.
 - You draw something that he has to copy then he must draw something that you have to copy.
 - You do an action e.g. hands on your head, that he has to copy, then he must do something that you have to copy.

Note: Keep the 'waiting time' for the child short and remember to model the phrase 'your turn', 'my turn' as appropriate. Accompany these phrases with a gesture, e.g. extending your hand towards the child for 'Your turn', then indicating yourself for 'My turn'.

Awareness and control of the face and mouth muscles are important as it is necessary for the tongue, lips, and jaw to be working effectively in order to develop clear, intelligible speech. If these muscles are weak, this affects the child's ability to correctly form speech sounds which in turn affects his ability to develop intelligible speech. Parents can be encouraged to help the development of these muscles by playing 'games' such as;

1. Tongue Exercises: Encourage the child to imitate the action of lifting their tongue up to touch the nose, down to touch the chin; move to either side of the mouth to 'touch' the ears, then around in a circle around the lip line. Make a game of it after helping the child to brush their teeth in the mornings and evenings.
2. Blow windmills, ping pong balls, or small pieces of paper off the child's hand or blow paper across a table.
3. Make exaggerated vowel sounds in front of the mirror in order to get variation in lip movements and to help strengthen the lip muscles i.e. ah; ee; oo. Make a game of this in front of the mirror and encourage the child to copy the adult. This may also be most successful at 'teeth brushing' time.

4. Make exaggerated facial expressions in front of the mirror e.g. happy, sad, and angry.

Eating skills:

We use the same muscles to eat as we do to speak so developing efficient eating skills is necessary for the development of intelligible speech.

1. Encourage the child to drink from a cup rather than from a bottle, or cup with a lid. Encouraging the child to drink from a cup rather than a bottle (including sports bottle or spouted lid mug) is particularly important if the child tends to be very dribbly or places the tongue well forward in his mouth when he vocalises.

Note:

- Sports bottles and lids on mugs have their place when you are travelling but limit their use when possible.
- If the child will not drink from anything other than a bottle, then naturally ensuring the child takes sufficient fluids is the priority.

2. As much as possible, encourage your child to eat firmer foods which require active chewing. These types of food are excellent for strengthening the tongue, jaw and lip muscles.
3. Soft foods such as yoghurts, mashed potatoes, pureed fruit require very little active involvement from these muscles.
4. Watch that the child actively bites, chews and swallows his food. Often children will suck on the food rather than chew it. They then either use their drink to 'wash' it down or they keep filling their mouth so that the bulk build-up of food triggers the swallow action. Encourage the child to bite small pieces of food, chew, and then swallow. This ensures active involvement of all the muscles within the mouth. Make sure the child has only one piece of food in his mouth at the time.

Receptive Language:

- Children's ability to understanding what is said to them (receptive language) is generally more advanced than their verbal language.
- Children who are spoken to regularly by adults, develop a greater and more complex vocabulary than those who do not receive frequent adult interaction.
- When talking to a child, reduce the amount of distracting noise. Turn off televisions and radios and turn down the volume on the phone if possible.

- Before asking a question or giving an instruction, always make sure you have the child's attention by firstly calling their name and waiting for them to stop their activity and establish eye contact (if appropriate). When you have their attention, then talk to the child.
- Never try to give an instruction when the child's attention is not focused on what you are saying. They are unlikely to remember the instruction or answer the question correctly if they are attending to something else, especially the computer or television.
- Reading or talking about the pictures in a book is one of the most effective means of assisting language development. Avoid books that are too busy or have too many words. Simple words, simple pictures.
- When looking through picture books or playing with a child, 'feed the language in' by telling the child 'what things are in the picture', 'who is in the picture', 'what they are doing' and 'where they are'. Help them to recognise objects and actions occurring in pictures.
- Avoid questioning the child and having them name objects in pictures or items around the house. In order to assist their receptive language, it is necessary to provide the child with the information they need in order for them to understand what is going on around them.
- If the child has difficulty understanding an instruction, avoid repeating the question more than twice. Assist the child by using gesture to help them to understand what you are wanting, e.g. gesture to the object that you might want the child to give you; or to the place where you want the item to go.
- When speaking to a child, do not speak too quickly or provide too much information at a time, but also do not speak in single words.
- Remember to use expression in your voice when speaking or reading to a child, as children gain a great deal of meaning from intonation patterns and this is what children tend to imitate first.

Expressive Language:

- Children generally acquire their first words from around 12 to 18 months of age. They begin to put 2 words together at approximately 2 years of age. By 3 years of age, children are combining 3 words. Most children begin with words that are

related to people and objects that are important to them.

Activity: It is therefore beneficial to make up a small photo album of photos of family members, close friends and people who are important to the child. Also photos of favourite toys, pets, family house and car. Encourage parents to take regular photos of places they frequently visit with the child and activities in which the child has participated. Allow the child access to this photos album whenever they want, and each day, a family member should go through the photos and talk about them with the child, such as 'who the child saw', 'where they went' and 'what they did'.

- In order to assist a child's verbal language, limit the amount of television and computer time. Children do not learn functional, interactive language from these.
- Encourage and assist the child to participate in Structured Play such as Puzzles; Drawing; Photo albums and Unstructured Play such as, Water play; Play dough; Finger painting, Ball play, Obstacle course; Gardening; Playground activities. The child can be assisted and encouraged to talk about what they are doing by having an adult also playing beside them and quietly talking about what they are doing. Name items and gently question the child, providing a response after some seconds if the child is unable to answer appropriately, e.g. 'What are we drawing?' (Wait for a response) 'We're drawing a fish'.
- Never withhold an object whether it is a toy or food until the child vocalises. This leads only to frustration and upset and is not a pleasant experience for anyone. You can hold the item a second longer until you have the child's attention and you have modelled the word for the child but then release the item.
- Communicating with other people is very enjoyable so children need to learn their language skills in a very positive manner and environment. Have as much fun as possible with activities that both the child and adult enjoy.

Opportunity and Desire to Communicate:

Make sure that the child's day is not kept to such a strict routine that everything is regularly timetabled. The child needs to have the opportunity to make requests for food or drink or a preferred activity.

The child should also be encouraged to make requests so that they learn that using their words is a very positive thing that does allow them some control of their lives, such as, getting food; getting books; going out.

4. Is it necessary for the child to have a formal language programme?

There are numerous ways that parents can assist their child's language development that can be incorporated into the daily routines without the need for a structured language programme.

1. Mealtimes are a perfect time to talk to the child about what they are eating, naming the foods and talking about its taste, e.g. sweet, spicy and the temperature, e.g. 'hot', 'cold'. This is an ideal time to encourage eye contact, awareness of facial expressions, imitation of tongue and lip movements.
2. Bath times provide an excellent opportunity to name the parts of the body as the parent is washing or drying the child.
3. Dressing time provides the opportunity to name the various pieces of clothing and identifying the colours of the different items and where on the body it goes, e.g. 'socks go on your feet'. It is also good for counting as the buttons are done up. This is also an excellent time to give the child an opportunity to communicate by allowing them to make choices as to what they want to wear by either pointing to the preferred colour or with assistance naming the item or colour.
4. Bedtimes are ideal times to read a book to the child or just talk about the pictures in a book. The parents and child can look through the small photo album together and identify pictures of the people seen that day, the things the child did and who they might be seeing the next day.

5. When should you start thinking about the child's language development?

From the minute a baby enters the world, his language skills are developing. The sounds, the smells, the tastes, the physical sensations and the sights form the basis of language development.

Once the child is born, the active involvement in teaching a child the skills he will

need to acquire functional language begins immediately.

Nature is wonderful how it has equipped us with the means of ensuring this occurs. The initial introduction to the Pre-verbal skills of language, begins during the very earliest stages of baby's development. These skills are introduced and should be encouraged the moment baby begins to feed.

As the baby is feeding, it is also a valuable time to feed in language, encouraging the development of communication and interaction.

Eye contact

Whether baby is being breast fed or bottle fed, the position in which baby is lying is ideal for establishing and maintaining eye contact. While feeding baby, the mum can be chatting about how beautiful she is. The baby is able to watch the changes in her facial expression and the movement of her mouth.

Oral awareness

Establishing good early feeding skills impacts on the development of the baby's awareness, strength and flexibility of tongue, lips, jaw and facial muscles. This consequently affects their eating skills and clarity of speech.

Imitation

Either before, after or during feeding times with baby, it is natural to make 'baby' sounds and copy the sounds baby makes. Although the baby is obviously not able to participate in intentional imitation at this early stage, it is important to introduce and reinforce the skill thereby encouraging and assisting the baby to develop the skill herself.

Physical awareness

When being fed, baby is exposed to a variety of sensations: The feel and smell of the mother; the taste and smell of the milk; the feeling of being held close, and the sounds of the voice. These are all powerful sensations for the child that teach them so much about the world.

It is never too early for baby to learn that communication is very enjoyable.

All the skills a child needs in order to understand what is said to him and be able to communicate effectively with other people, using clear, intelligible speech, are emerging from birth. So where you know that there is a possibility that the child's language could be delayed, such as children with Down Syndrome or other early diagnosed syndromes, it is important that these pre-verbal skills be focused on as soon as possible.

6. Finally:

Once you have determined the skills with which the child requires specific assistance, from the time you have spent observing and playing with him, then what better way to teach these skills than through enjoyable activities.

As I have explained, language skills can be effectively taught during day to day activities and through play. These I have found from my own experience as a Speech-Language Therapist, are the most effective ways to assist the child to transfer learnt skills in to everyday situations and thereby assist and encourage the child to use their language in a functional and interactive manner.