

Nurturing Oral Language Skills

By: Learning Disabilities Association of America (1999)

For most children, all the skills needed for oral language are acquired naturally by the time they are five years old. A kindergartner, for example, uses sophisticated vocabulary and grammar and has nearly accurate pronunciation, which are used effectively to manipulate his or her social environment. In order to acquire this much language skill, however, young children must first and consistently *hear* the language.

Infants and young children begin to make connections between words, or signifiers, and the things they indicate, when parents and caregivers name objects and actions for them. This is a simple activity, performed almost naturally, that does not require children to speak, but which gives them, nevertheless, words they will later use themselves. Moreover, *listening* to language is the groundwork for later reading skills. This is evident, for example, in the early stages of emergent literacy, when children do not comprehend stories sequentially. Instead, they perceive that each picture in a book has its own oral tale. As they appear to mimic reading, children are really retelling the events they have heard read to them previously and still see in the pictures. However, as children learn to identify letters and words, they gradually come to learn that words tell the story that pictures merely illustrate, and that the story itself does not change.

Early language interaction (infants listen, even though they cannot speak) and early language skills acquisition are critical to the brain's development. The brain is fully ready to think through tactile learning as early as nine months, and the neural networks for abstract thinking, such as math and logic, are set to begin to function. Language interaction and early exposure to sounds, music, and rhythms remain critical to later learning.

Parents can do much to nurture early oral language development in their children through creative and focused quality time spent with them. The following simple activities are valuable and can be done, even when quantity of time with children is hard to come by:

1. Talk to your child.

Finding time to do this is not necessary if you remember to talk to your child whenever you are together. In addition, language, reading and math can be taught informally as part of conversation:

- Talk about the day's events, a book the child has read, or the traffic signs you both see along the way whenever you are in a car together;
 - Ask your child to point out specific foods or household items. Describe the characteristics of a fruit (red, crunchy) and let the child identify it (apple).
2. Read to your child while he or she sits in your lap and take turns reading (or reciting) pages aloud. This fosters in the child a positive association with reading. For children with a limited attention span provide illustrated books with big, colorful, eye-catching pictures and minimal words.
3. Reading books should be an interactive experience. Try:
- Discussing the book's pictures and paraphrasing its story;
 - Letting your child make up his or her own version of what will happen next in a story;
 - If a story is familiar, allowing your child to finish telling key events or giving the succeeding rhyme;
 - Giving your child the opportunity to correct you by purposely misreading or omitting items and events; or
 - Acting out the story or creating a puppet show; and
 - Reinforcing sequential reading by starting at the beginning of the book and demonstrating the direction of written text, from left to right and top to bottom of the page.
4. Cultivate phonological awareness with auditory and visual word games, such as:
- Rhyming games. If a child does not hear the rhyme, try a game with words that begin with the same sound;
 - The broken record game. Say a word very slowly and break it into syllables, then have the child repeat the word at a normal speed;
 - Pick a game your child enjoys, such as matching letters, and tracing or copying the names of familiar people; or
 - Have your child draw pictures and make up a story, while you act as scribe.

5. Children learn one-to-one correspondences, then patterns and sequence.

Children learn to count, for example, and to recite the alphabet before they connect numbers and letters with math and reading. Help them master concepts by interacting with everyday objects around the home. Try:

- Having your child point to one cup or two plates, and then having him or her bring them to the table. Ask your child to place one napkin next to one plate;
 - Playing a game in which the child matches letters to items in the home that begin with that letter (for example, [v] and "vacuum"); or
 - Engaging in activities that involve patterns and sequence.
6. Link young children with positive early reading experiences using audiotapes, videos, reading buddies, lap reading, and with a print rich home environment. A love of books helps to make the ongoing effort of learning to read fun and worthwhile, even for children who struggle to master its skills.