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Promoting Oral Language Development in Young Children

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Research tells us that children who have strong oral language skills often have strong reading and writing skills. In contrast, children with oral language problems are at higher risk of reading and writing difficulties (Scarborough, 2001). Educators and parents should encourage oral language even in the earliest stages of a child's development. The following is a list of specific strategies to help promote oral language development in young children.

Talk with Your Children

Educators and parents should talk or converse with their children whenever possible. Children often love to talk about their friends, families, or favorite activities. Try to develop "talking points." Talking points are conversation starters that you can use with a child. Consider writing them on a set of note cards to keep with you whenever you want to promote conversation with a child. Make conversation a game by asking the child to "pick a card" to initiate a conversation.

Get Close & Listen

When speaking with children it is important to get close. The child should be able to see your lips and facial expressions, hear your voice clearly, and make eye contact with you. Making sure that you "get close" helps ensure that the child keeps an interest in what you are saying. Make sure during conversation with your child that you are sending a clear message that you are listening. When a child speaks to you, make comments about what they are saying, nod you head, or add "Mm-hmm," "Really?" or "Tell me more."

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(cont.)

Respond and Expand

When a child says something to you, respond whenever possible. After you respond, try to expand the conversation. Add more context to the language even when a child's response is a simple one. For example, if the child says, "I like apples," the teacher/parent might say, "I like apples too. What kind of apple do you like best?"

Talk About What You Are Doing

Daily activities, such as cleaning up toys or snack time, provide many opportunities for language development. Talk with children about what they are doing and what you are doing. This type of talking exposes children to language in general, involves them in learning conversation skills, and helps children acquire and use vocabulary that is important in their everyday lives.

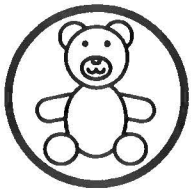
Tell Stories

Tell stories every day about things from the past or things that will happen. The teacher can talk about something the class might do that day or the parent can talk about an upcoming event. During a story, use prompts to encourage storytelling like, "Tell me a story," "What happened next?" and "When did that happen?" or "Tell me what you did at school (Grandma's house) today."

Use Appropriate Levels of Vocabulary

When speaking with children we have to be careful to not use too many new words or too few new words. There is no magic formula for the correct number of words, so teachers and parents must be aware of each child's abilities to figure out if the vocabulary is confusing to the child or if he/she is able to keep up and understand.

Provide Prompts That Promote Oral Language



Include microphones, old telephones, puppets, flannel boards, and even paper towel tubes in your child's play area. Items to play dress-up are big hits with children. Pretending to be someone else encourages children to mimic the vocabulary, facial expressions, and body language that they see and hear from others. These types of prompts encourage oral language interactions. Make them available and encourage children to use them during their playtime.

Resources:

V. S. Bennett-Armistead, *Literacy and the youngest learner.* Scholastic, Inc., New York, NY, 2005.

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