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The Language of Babies, Toddlers and Preschoolers: Connecting Research to Practice

Why is Early Language Development Critical?

Long before a child can recognize the ABCs or turn sounds into words, she must master the basics of human communication, such as turn-taking and “closing the circle” of two-way speech.¹ The development of language skills begins at birth, with the first parent-child interactions, and continues through the explosive growth of vocabulary in toddlerhood and the emergence of more complex syntax in preschoolers. Research on the origins of literacy has generated an emerging consensus that the early years are critical to children’s later literacy development.²

Even before a child learns to speak, the amount and quality of the language she hears has an important impact on her developing communication skills. Sadly, for many children, particularly those facing multiple risk factors including poverty, their home and primary care environments are not structured to maximize language and literacy development. We now know from research that there is a strong association between the ‘language gap’ children display in the early years and the eventual achievement gap they exhibit in school. Far too often, the early language and literacy needs of babies and toddlers are overlooked, thus reducing the likelihood they will enter preschool eager to learn or go on to kindergarten equipped to succeed.

Unfortunately, many children who are eventually labeled “unprepared” spent their early years in unresponsive care settings, missing out on the behaviors and language embedded in responsiveness that form the basis for social, emotional and language development.

The Research Connection

Research has shown that the interactions children have with parents and other caregivers in the first months and years of life have a powerful lifelong influence on their cognitive, social and emotional development. Infants and toddlers who receive responsive care and encouragement early in life are more apt to develop self-confidence as early learners and a joy for learning. Eventually, preschool and kindergarten teachers have an easier time engaging them in learning activities than less-confident or less-interested children.

Basic communication and language development skills are a crucial part of the foundation of school readiness that is formed during the earliest months and years after birth. Research demonstrates that these skills depend in large part on language experiences during infancy and toddlerhood. Children who hear fewer words are engaged in less conversation before age three with their caregivers, and have dramatically smaller vocabularies than children who have richer early language experiences. An often-cited research study found that the average child from a family of professionals hears 11 million words per year; a child from a working class family hears 6 million words per year; and a child from a family receiving welfare benefits hears 3 million words per year.³ Unfortunately, this gap widens over time, making it less likely for these children to ever “catch up” to their more advantaged peers.

Yet it’s not just the *quantity* of words young children are exposed to, but also the *quality* of the interactions they have with adults that fosters language and vocabulary acquisition. Early language development is dependent on the quality of the social interactions a child has with the important adults in his life. New research exploring joint attention demonstrates that a child learns vocabulary and language best in situations where he shares attention with his parents or other caregivers. Social situations in which caregivers and infants share the same focus on an object or topic are referred to as *episodes of joint attention*.

The more content-rich, shared interactions a child has with responsive caregivers, the more his vocabulary will grow. Caregivers who are looking for opportunities to create these interactions with pre-verbal children are paying

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close attention to the child and responding to non-verbal cues. Infants and young children whose parents find more opportunities for joint attention have larger vocabularies than children whose parents are less attuned to the focus of their baby’s attention.⁴

How parents and caregivers talk is at least as important as *how much* they talk. When adults expand and repeat children’s words, language development improves.⁵ Why? Infants and young children best understand, and best use, the language they hear if they can connect it to specific objects or activities. The more an adult can respond to an infant’s gaze with related language instead of redirecting the child’s attention elsewhere, the more easily the infant can make connections between concepts and words. It is believed that this type of speech supports word learning by lowering the cognitive load (i.e., how much information a child has to sort through about her environment) on a child and helping her connect words to the world around her.⁶ High-quality child care environments, where caregivers look for opportunities to engage in episodes of joint attention and are responsive to the cues of infants and toddlers, have been shown to be tied to higher rates of language acquisition.⁷

Joint attention is more than a means to larger vocabulary; it is also a process that fosters secure emotional attachment, the basis for healthy social and emotional development. For very young children, social and emotional development and cognitive development are intertwined. Responsive caregiving and the intentional use of joint attention meet both of these developmental needs of children and should be practiced in all care and education settings for children from birth.

Translating Language Development Research Into Practice

Early childhood practitioners know that children who are verbal are more likely to interact with others in healthy ways. One of the most critical components of school readiness is to ensure that children – beginning at birth – have access to care and education that will enable them to build strong foundations in language and literacy.

Many children at risk of school failure come from families experiencing multiple challenges: teen mothers with low incomes, low education levels and unstable employment histories. Such factors place these children at significant risk for poor developmental, school and life outcomes. Without intervention early in life, children facing these challenges are more likely to enter kindergarten behind their more advantaged peers in terms of social and emotional skills, behavioral self-regulation skills, oral language and communication skills, vocabulary and early literacy skills. These children need a much more individualized, intensive approach to intervention and to early oral language and literacy support.

The Ounce of Prevention Fund has been working to bring current research knowledge into the classrooms at the Educare Center of Chicago since 2000. Our research and program staff work together to encourage age-appropriate language development for children from birth to age five. Trainers help teachers incorporate language development approaches into their classrooms and assist program staff in learning how to partner with parents to help them understand their roles as their child's first and most important teacher.

Early language development research and our experiences running programs for at-risk children indicate that there are attributes of environments that facilitate children's language development in the first years of life:

- Frequent exposure to rich and varied language
- Caregivers who follow children's cues and engage in episodes of joint attention
- Caregivers who read frequently to young children, fostering expressive language and comprehension and promoting vocabulary acquisition

Language Development from Birth

The first building blocks of language happen very early in a child's life. When parents, teachers and other caring adults engage and sustain interactions with children based on the child's interest, they help strengthen the child's experience as a communication partner. The child experiences joy in this process and associates these 'teaching moments' with feelings of confidence and security. Research demonstrates that language and literacy acquisition happens best in the context of caring, attentive relationships. These relationships can influence three areas of behavior that are critical components of language development: expressive language, receptive language and social engagement.

Infants under 12 months play with sounds (e.g., babble consonants) and recognize labels, evidenced by turning their heads when their names are called. They will engage in 'turn-taking,' such as when the baby says "ah," the parent repeats the sound, and the baby says "ah" again. Younger toddlers participate in joint attention. They follow an adult's eye gaze and begin to use gestures to alert others to their needs and interests. Older toddlers focus on actions and attributes and show greater grammatical complexity. Preschoolers from 3- to 4-years-old move from early attempts to engage in pretend play to scenarios full of detail, with narrative structure complete with sequencing and chronology. Older preschoolers demonstrate the capacity to dictate stories to adults and experiment with fun parts of speech such as synonyms, antonyms and categories. Much like an infant who shows excitement when she begins to babble, preschoolers start to recognize patterns in words and begin scatting with initial sounds, (e.g., recognizing that *map*, *mop* and *Mary* all begin with the same sound), and then go on to much more complex sentences as they use syntax to expand the way they describe relationships between people, objects and time.

The Research-Program Partnership

Research-program partnerships can bolster program effectiveness. Through this kind of connection, cutting-edge research, such as new findings on joint attention, can be applied directly to classroom settings to most effectively facilitate language development.

How does this work? In direct service, teams of experienced teachers with bachelor's degrees and early childhood experience work with master's-degree-level teachers to create optimal classroom environments. Researchers and program staff work together to develop and implement strategies to improve teachers' knowledge and skills in working with preschool-age children to promote language and literacy. The goals are to use assessment outcomes to provide children with individualized instruction and to improve teaching. Research and program teams can also develop activities to inspire parents to engage with their children around language and literacy.

Supporting teachers as they translate knowledge of language development and observations of children into regular classroom practices involves helping them recognize opportunities to partner with children in episodes of joint attention – paying close attention to what has captured a child's interest and staying with the child's interest through commentary and shared physical manipulation of the object. However, it is not enough to just talk about joint attention. Teachers have to see it in practice. For instance, during mealtime with young infants, trainers model how to maintain eye contact, while smiling, repeating and adding meaning to the baby's sounds. With older infants and toddlers, they name the foods the children are eating; and with older toddlers, they expand topics, such that if the children are eating peas, they talk about 'what else is green.'

Joint attention is an effective strategy to build language and vocabulary, but it is also an important way adults show children they are interested in them and their interests. Infants and young toddlers might not

be able to say what they are interested in, so teachers in infant and toddler classrooms need to be keen observers, paying careful attention to what children look at, react and point to – the behaviors that communicate their interests, their likes and dislikes. Effective teachers follow a child's eye gaze and talk specifically about what the child is looking at. Caregivers help children attach vocabulary to objects by pointing to objects children are interested in or by pointing to something to help children follow others' attention. Preschool teachers can implement a play-based comprehensive curriculum that structures time in the day for preschoolers to act on their interests by choosing areas in the classroom to play, materials to incorporate in their play and scenarios to act out in their play with other children. During these particular times in the day, teachers create episodes of shared attention with preschoolers, following their ideas, interests and scenarios, and offering commentary, content-specific vocabulary and questions to help children expand the complexity of their vocabulary, syntax and play.

Effective research-program partnerships help teachers engage in intentional practices, encouraging them to:

Become versed in language development to recognize what language development looks like in the classroom;

Learn to use observation and assessment data to identify where individual children are on a continuum so it is clear how a child's progress relates to typical language development, and what activities can best support that child's progress; and

Scaffold learning by adding vocabulary and concepts to expand children's understanding and experience.

Parents' Roles in Language and Literacy Development

Parents from families with multiple stressors may need particular help in discovering the joy of participating in their children's language development. Experienced teachers can model effective interactions to engage parents to practice basic communication skills: *notice, comment and invite*. Notice what the child is interested in. Comment on the object or activity of interest. And invite the child to think, learn and talk more about the topic by linking it to the content of the world through the use of open-ended questions and information. Some parents may need modeling to see the connections that arise in episodes of joint attention; or the fun of dialogic reading with their children to support language development (e.g., asking "what" and open-ended questions, and building on what the child says to engage her further in the book).

A preschooler might be playing with ice cubes when his mother comes to pick him up from school. Teachers can help parents see the value in talking with their children about ice cubes, temperature and melting – all science concepts: "I noticed you are playing with the ice cubes... what do you think will happen when the ice cube gets warm? Will it melt? That's right! It will turn into a puddle of water!" Effective modeling can show parents how excited young children become when their parents show interest in what they are focused on by looking at and commenting on the same thing. Like teachers, parents can supply the information or content of the world and help their children develop vocabulary and syntax.

Language and Social and Emotional Development

As the research on joint attention demonstrates, language development and social and emotional development are intertwined throughout early childhood. In infancy, responsive care leads to opportunities for non-verbal and verbal communication and joint attention. As children move through the stages from infancy to toddlerhood to preschool, they increasingly use language for social engagement. In well-functioning social environments, children gesture for their preferences and get their needs met. By preschool, children begin to self-regulate through an understanding of emotional and behavioral literacy and are able to talk about themselves and their needs.

Too often there are stories from colleagues about preschoolers or kindergartners who are "off task." When this happens, take a moment to ask, "Off task for what?" Children are not off task for what they are

interested in. Ideally, by the time a child is five, he has internalized the idea that sometimes he must listen and learn about things having to do with an adult, and sometimes an adult listens and learns about things having to do with him. Both of these activities become part of learning, and the child finds learning fun. His language has developed and he has acquired the ability to take initiative and listen. What better outcome could be achieved?

The Importance of Quality

Responsive and thoughtful care and attention for children under the age of five is one of the most critical factors in improving school and life success for children in at-risk populations in this country. Research-based strategies such as joint attention foster critical early language and literacy skills that children need to be able to enter kindergarten prepared and eager to learn. We know how important it is to help both parents and staff understand, appreciate and use focused, intensive, research-based strategies to promote early language and literacy development. Researchers can help staff see the benefit of using data in classrooms.

Successful program improvement addresses parent and staff knowledge, skills and attitudes about language development: what it means to use a rich and varied vocabulary, why it matters, and what are reasonable expectations for children's language production at various stages of development. Research continues to offer insights about what children need to become good communicators, early and eager learners and strong readers. A strong research-program partnership helps programs stay abreast of research developments and translate science into meaningful activities for parents and staff to use with very young children.

Funders, policymakers, early childhood professionals, advocates and families can help young children develop critical early language and literacy skills by partnering to make sure the following conditions are in place:

- Quality program designs
- Research-based professional development for teachers working with infants, toddlers, preschoolers and their families
- Resources to ensure language-rich classroom environments
- Accessible assessment data to help teachers strengthen and tailor instruction and care for individual children

When Children Don't Develop Critical Language Skills

Toddlers and preschoolers who have not received responsive care in language-rich environments often exhibit one or many of the following patterns:

- Longer than expected use of sounds versus single words
- Low rates of verbal behavior
- Over-reliance on gesture to communicate their needs or wants
- Withdrawn or shy behavior (internalizing that their needs or wants are not met)
- Agitated or tantrum behavior (externalizing that their needs or wants are not met)
- Difficulty with interactive social play with peers, and at times, aggression toward peers due to difficulties solving social issues without vocabulary or language skills

The Ounce of Prevention Fund Early Language and Literacy Project

When teachers and other caregivers become aware of the importance of early language development, they can be trained – and get better at – implementing strategies that enhance a child's early language development. Yet waiting until children reach preschool to begin this critical work is too late.

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For 25 years, the Ounce of Prevention Fund

has worked to improve opportunities for young children living in poverty and their families. We run direct service programs for children and families, train early childhood professionals across the state of Illinois, research what works, and advocate for sound public policies. We translate research into practice in programs for children and families, and continually refine those practices to ensure the best quality. We also help partners in other states do the same with their programs for at-risk children, birth to age five.