

The Importance of Play on Language Skills Development

Among many of the changes that a child will go through whilst in your care, the rapid growth of language is arguably the most important, with the development of vocabulary, conversational skills, storytelling and sentence complexity.



As highly skilled practitioners you provide a variety of play opportunities that promote these skills and assist with language development as a whole. But what is language? Matt Anthony, the Welsh Language Support Coordinator for Wales PPA, gives us an insight.

The developmental stages of language through play

Infants

Prior to oral communication, infants will often engage with others through non-verbal methods such as facial expressions. For example, a baby will smile at its father and the father will smile back. The child is beginning to develop an awareness of the effect of her own behaviour on others, also known as cause and effect. As the child begins to verbally communicate, through the use of cooing and babbling, the caregivers will repeat and respond positively. As the child's understanding of cause and effect further develops, she will produce more sounds in order to get a response. This emergence of reciprocal interactions is a foundation for later social skill development.



What is language and what is play?

Language can be defined as the ability to communicate with others. It can be broken down into three key areas: receptive, expressive and pragmatic language skills. Receptive language is the ability to comprehend what others are saying, while expressive language is the ability to use language to express oneself. Pragmatics is the social use of language. It is important when thinking about language to remember that symbols, gestures or motions are forms of language. To exclude them from the definition of language would be denying the language of the deaf community. Play is the universal language of children. Through play, children can make sense of the world around them and of themselves and each other. As we know, play is the main way that children learn. Because it is intrinsically led and fun, children can become very enthused and absorbed in any play-based learning opportunities they access.



Toddlers

Toddlers develop the foundations for social, communication, motor and academic skills during play. It is your role as practitioners to ensure the availability of an abundance of play opportunities that engage and absorb children. The development of verbal language at this time has a direct impact on developing play skills. Role play allows children to engage in creative imaginary play and allows the child to imitate the language and behaviours of others. A simple game of rolling a ball back and forth begins to develop important social skills needed in the future such as turn taking and sharing.



Pre-school

The growth of language and cognitive skills during the pre-school years leads to more complex imaginary play. At this age, children engage in more make-believe play and move from parallel play to cooperative play with peers. Creative and imaginary play are further developed as a stick becomes a sword and the child becomes a pirate. This type of

play can introduce children to a host of new and unfamiliar words and allows for repetition and language development by 'accident'. Children at this age enjoy sorting objects into meaningful groups or creating simple crafts. An understanding of turn-taking and increased attention span allow children at this age to also begin to play simple board games.

How can you facilitate language development through play?

Allow the child to lead – a child's interest level often determines how engaged and absorbed she will become in a play opportunity or activity. It is therefore important to really know the children in your care and observe their play. Through careful observation you will be able to plan and provide opportunities that the children will engage with and benefit from. Increased engagement in an activity will lead to greater language acquisition.

Be an expander – it is important to ask open ended questions of the children and provide accurate language input. Input can include commenting about what you or your child are doing, adding a word or phrase to the child's short phrases, exposing your child to synonyms, or by modelling the correct sentence structure. This will depend on the stage of language development of the child.

Examples include the following:

Child: "car"

Practitioner: "Yes, a big car"

Child: "car" **Practitioner:** "Go, car, go!"

Child: "He goed fast."

Practitioner: "Yes, he went fast."

Child: "That's a huge truck!"

Practitioner: "You're right. It's enormous!"

Allow opportunities for repetition. As the old adage goes, practice makes perfect. Although repeating the same activity may appear boring or unproductive to us as adults, it helps to develop the child's vocabulary and pronunciation. Therefore, children should be encouraged to repeat routines, actions, and words, particularly those they enjoy. Repetition of words or phrases helps to build vocabulary and expressive language. Children will often sing along to a song once they have heard it several times. Repetition of songs can also be used to teach new vocabulary.

Sing songs

Singing songs and nursery rhymes is a fun and interactive way for young children to learn language. Singing songs provides increased exposure to vocabulary through repetition. Songs can include well-known children's songs like 'The Wheels on the Bus' and 'Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes'. They can also be adapted to fit a particular activity or whatever you and your child are doing at the time – for example, snack time.

The time frames presented in this article are based on the average developmental milestones of pre-school children. It is important to keep

in mind that children develop at different stages and that some may achieve these stages earlier or later than others.

Reference:

Bailey, D.B., Wolery, M., & McLean, M.E. (1996) *Assessing Infants and Preschoolers with Special Needs*. The University of Virginia

