Supporting Oral Language Development in Young Children*

Educators and parents have known for quite some time that literacy and language development are critical indicators of a child’s success in school. In addition, research tells us that children who have strong oral language skills often have strong reading and writing skills and that those with oral language problems are at a higher risk of experiencing reading and writing difficulties. Given this, what can parents and educators do to promote oral language development in young children? The following are some recommendations made by groups such as the International Reading Association (IRA) and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC):

- Read aloud to the child. Having a positive attitude towards reading helps children grow up to become lifelong readers. Asking questions about the story, allowing children to retell the story, and talking about the pictures help develop language and comprehension skills. Reading books together also helps a child develop knowledge of book handling and print conventions, such as reading from left to right, how to turn pages, and reading a story from front to back.

- Engage in meaningful conversations regularly. Taking the time to talk provides children with the opportunity to develop language skills. When you point out and name signs of well-known stores and restaurants while driving, you are making them aware of environmental print. When you listen to children as they talk about their experiences or made-up stories, you are helping them to understand that words have meaning and are a powerful form of communication.

- Sing songs and rhymes, and do finger plays together. These activities help children develop phonological awareness, which is the ability to recognize the sounds of oral language and how these sounds can be blended together, manipulated, and broken apart.

- Visit the library regularly. A comfortable library setting encourages children to develop the habit of reading for pleasure.

- Allow many opportunities for children to draw and write. A toddler’s scribbles and a preschooler’s invented spelling lay the foundation for beginning writing skills. As children attempt to write words they hear, they are becoming aware of the correspondence between sounds and letters.

- Understand that every child’s language or dialect is worthy of respect as a valid system for communication. It reflects the identities, values, and experiences of the child’s family and community.

- Treat children as if they are conversationalists, even if they are not yet talking. Children learn very early about how conversations work (taking turns, looking attentively, using facial expressions, etc.) when they have experiences with conversing adults. (Continued on Page 2….)

* Adapted from Celia Genishi’s “Young Children’s Oral Language Development” (for full article see: http://www.comenity.com/disability/speech/young-children.html) and Alana J. Tutwiler’s “Helping Young Children Develop Language and Literacy Skills: What Parents Can Do” (for full article see: http://www.womensdigest.net/departments/childjour/cj0803a.html).
Supporting Oral Language Development in Young Children (continued....)

- Encourage interaction among children. Peer learning is an important part of language development, especially in mixed-age groups. Activities involving a wide range of materials should promote speech. There should be a balance between individual activities and those that nurture collaboration and discussion, such as dramatic play, block-building, book-sharing, or carpentry.

One thing to keep in mind is that, as with other aspects of development, language acquisition and oral language development are not predictable. One child may say her first word at 10 months, another at 20 months. One child may use complex sentences at 5 ½ years, another at 3 years.

In addition, parents and educators should not focus on “problems,” such as the inability to pronounce words as adults do (for example, when children pronounce r’s like w’s) or overgeneralization of grammatical rules (for example, when children use “goed” and “foots” instead of “went” and “feet”). Most children will outgrow such things, and constant correction of a child’s speech is usually unproductive and can deter them from experimenting with language. As a result, this will impair their oral language development.

Instead, teachers and educators can help sustain natural language development by providing environments full of language development opportunities. Parents, caregivers, teachers, and guardians are the chief resources in language development. Children learn much from each other, but adults are the main conversationalists, questioners, listeners, responders, and sustainers of language development and growth in the childcare center, classroom, or home.

Fun Facts about Diversity in Los Angeles County and at LAUP

Los Angeles County, with nearly 10 million people, is by far the most populated county in the United States and is also one of the most diverse.

Los Angeles is home to people from more than 140 countries speaking 224 different identified languages.

54.1% of people living in Los Angeles County speak a language other than English at home.

The top eight languages spoken by LAUP children are English, Spanish, Korean, Tagalog, Armenian, Vietnamese, Cantonese, and Farsi.

Five Common Myths about Language Learning*

Myth 1: Children learn second languages quickly and easily.

Fact: Current research shows that children have no natural advantage in learning languages over adults. Even though social factors may favor child learners, children do not have the base of vocabulary or memory techniques to help them easily master a second language.

What teachers can do: Teachers should have realistic expectations of their English learners and know that learning a second language is as difficult, if not more difficult, for a child. Teachers can support language development by creating a supportive environment in which children can feel comfortable in experimenting with language (for example, teachers can provide English and bilingual books for their children).

Myth 2: The more time students spend in a second language setting, the faster they will learn the language.

Fact: Studies show that children in bilingual classes, with exposure to both the home language and English, develop English language skills equal to those of children who have been in English-only programs.

What teachers can do: Teachers should keep in mind that even though oral communication skills in a second language may be acquired within 2 or 3 years, it may take 4 to 6 years to acquire the high level of proficiency needed to participate in many classroom activities. Teachers can provide language input and support to children in both English and the home language to help their language acquisition.

Myth 3: Children have acquired a second language once they can speak it.

Fact: Some teachers assume that children who can speak comfortably in English are in full control of the language. But just because a child can speak “well” does not mean they can read and write “well” in that language.

What teachers can do: Teachers should keep in mind that children who are learning a second language may have language problems in reading and writing that are not obvious if only their oral abilities are used to judge their English proficiency. Teachers can provide additional literacy support by making English and bilingual books available to the children.

*Adapted from Barry McLaughlin's 1992 “Myths and Misconceptions about Language Learning: What Every Teacher Needs to Unlearn” (for full article see http://www.cal.org/resources/Digests/myths.html) and the AED Center for Early Care & Education’s “Making a Difference: A Framework for Supporting First and Second Language Development in Preschool Children of Migrant Farm Workers” (for full document see: http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2sql/content_storage_01/0000019b/80/3d/48/ed.pdf).
Myth 4: All children learn a second language in the same way.

Fact: Different learning styles and cultural communication methods affect language learning, just as they do other types of learning. For example, some children are outgoing and sociable and learn the second language quickly. They do not worry about mistakes and use their limited resources to get input from native speakers. Other children are shy and quiet. They learn by listening and watching. Research shows that both types of learners can be successful second language learners.

What teachers can do: When working with children from culturally diverse backgrounds, teachers can use a variety of instructional activities that consider the children's diversity of experience, as children are likely to be more responsive to a teacher who supports the values of the home or family culture.

Myth 5: Children will become confused if learning two languages at the same time.

Fact: While some people believe that it is important to speak and use only one language with a child, most research concludes that there are no negative effects of bilingualism on the linguistic, cognitive, or social development of children, and that there may even be some general advantages in these areas of development for bilingual children.

What teachers can do: Children who have the opportunity to speak two languages should be encouraged and given the opportunity to maintain both. Children from homes where the primary language spoken is not English should be encouraged to develop their home language as well as learn English to help them succeed in a global, multilingual world.

Some Classroom Resources:

Books for teachers’ and aides’ professional development:
3. One Child, Many Worlds: Early Learning in Multicultural Communities, by Eve Gregory.
5. Second-Language Acquisition in Childhood: Volume 1, Preschool Children, by Barry McLaughlin.
7. No Limits to Literacy for Preschool English Learners, by Theresa A. Roberts.

Books for use with students:

Multilingual/Multicultural:
2. Hello World! Greetings in 42 Languages Around the Globe!, by Manya Stojic.
4. My Name is Yoon, by Helen Recorvits and Gabi Swiatkowski.

Arabic/English:
My Arabic Words Book (Arabic Edition), by Juma Siddiqua.

Armenian/English:

Chinese/English:
1. Fun Time Always, by Dr. Joel Janicki.
2. 1, 2, 3, Go! by Huy Voun Lee.

Farsi/English:

Korean/English:

Russian/English:

Spanish/English:
1. Hairs/Pelitos, by Sandra Cisneros.
3. The Bilingual Book of Rhymes, Songs, Stories, and Fingerplays: Over 450 Spanish/English Selections (Spanish Edition), by Pam Schiller, Rafael Lara-Alecio, and Beverly J. Irby
4. My Friends/Mis Amigos, by Taro Gomi.

Tagalog/English:
My First Book of Tagalog Words: Filipinos Rhymes and Verses, by Liana Romulo and Jaime Laurel.

Vietnamese/English:
These resource QuickTips are intended to supply useful information for LAUP coaches and preschool providers to support and develop high-quality preschool programs.

Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP) is a non-profit organization established to provide high-quality preschool education to the children in Los Angeles County. Since 2005, its creative model that focuses on high-quality has touched the lives of more than 30,000 preschool-aged children through enriching curricula and nurturing environments aimed to best prepare four-year-olds to succeed in kindergarten and beyond. LAUP is primarily funded by First 5 LA, and is lauded as a premier organization by the California Council for Excellence.

Along with funding, LAUP provides Quality Support coaches who work alongside teachers in classrooms to offer support and guidance on exemplary practices.

Resources:

Free or Low-Cost Adult English as a Second Language (ESL) Classes in LA County:

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Organization Offering Training Services in Los Angeles:
California Preschool Instructional Network (CPIN) http://www.cpinn.us/

Where Can I Learn More about the Topics Covered in This QuickTips?
For a list of references used in this QuickTips, questions, suggestions or submissions, please contact LAUP’s Carolyne Crolotte at ccrolotte@laup.net or (213) 416-1849.