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Practice

A parent's guide to ... Communication and Language

Nancy Stewart, 03 September 2012, 12:00am

A child's first word is an exciting moment for parents and a wonderful feat of intelligence for a child. By Nancy Stewart



It is just one marker along the path that your child started on even before birth, through listening to your voice, and continues to develop in keen efforts to take part in the amazing human world of communicating with each other. Communication and Language is so important to your child's all-round progress that it is now recognised in the revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) as a Prime Area of Learning and Development.

- What is Communication and Language?

Communication and Language describes the way a child develops the ability to share with other people messages about all kinds of things - needs and wants, feelings, information, and ideas. It includes both understanding what other people are communicating and expressing what they want to say for themselves.

There are many ways of communicating, such as facial expressions, gestures, sounds, and tone of voice. A baby or young child pays close attention to these signals from the people around them and comes to understand what they mean.

At first babies communicate their own messages without being aware of it - for instance, crying from hunger or wriggling when in an uncomfortable position. But when your baby realises that these signals get a response from you, they soon begin to communicate with you on purpose.

Language is a special way of communicating that takes us much further in what we can say. Using words, we can be more precise and talk about complicated ideas, about things that happened in the past or might happen in the future, things that we imagine or hope. Language helps us to be clear in our thinking, too, as we talk to ourselves in our minds.



In the EYFS there are three parts to Communication and Language:

Listening and Attention - which comes first because children need to pay attention to how people are communicating in order to learn to do it themselves, and they need to listen carefully to all the sounds and rhythms that make up words and sentences

Understanding - the bridge to talking, as children begin to make sense of the body language and all the words from people around them

Speaking - expressing their own meaning to people around them, with body language and in words (using the voice or with signs for children with speaking difficulties).

All of these aspects develop only in interactions with other people, so how a child makes relationships is another important part of becoming a communicator.



- Why is Communication and Language a Prime area of Learning and Development?

The Prime areas of the EYFS are at the centre of early child development, laying the foundations for success. Given the right opportunities, a child's brain rapidly makes the connections necessary for development in the Prime areas. Children instinctively seek out the opportunities they need, so your child is eager to learn about language in everything they do with you.

Communication and Language is recognised as an essential foundation for children to develop well across other areas of learning. Children who learn to understand and use more words in their early years are likely to do well as they continue on through school.

There are several reasons why being able to communicate and use language well has a powerful effect on a child's life and learning:

Communicating thoughts and feelings helps to build strong relationships with other people.

Language is a central part of how we share information and ideas, and of teaching all subjects in school.

Learning to read and write depends on being able to understand and use language - reading is simply a recorded form of understanding language, and writing is recording what you want to say.

Language helps children to be clear in their thinking.

When children can say what they want and feel, it helps them to deal with frustrations and behave in more constructive ways.



- What can I do?

Because parents are the most important people in a child's life, your role is at the centre of your child's developing language skills. A quick rule of thumb is that children need:

someone to talk with, and

something to talk about.

Someone to talk with

Talk to your baby or child about what you are doing. The more language children hear, the more they learn. It doesn't matter that they won't understand at first - they will be absorbing the sounds of the language and will gradually make the links between the words and what you are talking about.

Let your child know that you are listening, which encourages them to express themselves. With a baby, 'listening' means responding quickly to their ways of communicating. With small children, follow their lead by responding to what they say.

Spend time together, face to face, enjoying chatting.

Take turns in 'conversations'. With a baby this will be copying your baby's movements and sounds, and waiting for the baby to respond again. With toddlers and older children, respond to what they say to keep the conversation going by making comments of your own. Avoid too many questions - nobody likes to be grilled by an interviewer.

Turn off the TV and other distracting sounds. Children learn to communicate with real people, and not from media - and background noise can get in the way of their ability to pay attention and listen to talk.

Something to talk about

See everyday activities as talking times. A world of words is waiting in the washing-up, going to the shops, getting dressed and so on. Going out and about can also offer rich occasions for talk, but

for a small child there is interest and a language opportunity in everything they do.

Play with your child. Children want to communicate about what interests them, and play is most interesting of all.

Songs and rhymes are great opportunities to use and play with language. As well as traditional ones, you can use any you know - or make one up, and change it as you like.

Books bring all sorts of things into the cosy space on your lap. You don't have to read all the words, but you can talk about whatever your child finds interesting in the pictures.

Most of all enjoy the time you spend together for the closeness and fun it brings - also knowing that all types of communication, from silly chatter and jokes to serious thinking about something that puzzles or worries your child, are laying foundations for your child's success in the future.

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THE REVISED EARLY YEARS FOUNDATION STAGE

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) sets the standards that nurseries, childminders and other early years providers in England must meet to ensure that children develop and learn well and are kept healthy and safe.

The skills, abilities and knowledge that a child is likely to learn in the vital early years, between birth and age five, are divided into seven areas of Learning and Development in the revised EYFS: three Prime and four Specific.

The Prime areas are:

Physical Development

Personal, Social and Emotional Development, and
Communication and Language.

The Specific areas are:

Literacy

Mathematics

Knowledge of the World, and

Expressive Arts and Design.

All the areas are important and interconnected. However, the Prime areas are seen as fundamental in the earliest years from birth to three, as they support all of children's development and later learning. Without enough of the right kinds of experiences in the Prime areas, children may struggle with their learning, find it difficult to communicate well and their confidence and emotional resilience may be affected.

Importantly, the revised EYFS recognises that children learn through:

playing

exploring

being active

creating, and

thinking critically.

It acknowledges too that children develop at their own rate and in their own ways, so 'stages of development' have no fixed age boundaries.