

LANGUAGE MILESTONES FOR SCHOOL SUCCESS.

In the second half of the school year it is a fitting time to reflect on the year to date and look forward towards 2009. Many teachers and parents will have in mind the children who began school earlier in the year and are perhaps asking themselves questions. How well did they adjust to the school routines and demands? What friendships were made? How did they progress with the early stages of formal education?

Research tells us that young children's attitudes to school and how they see themselves as learners, are formed within the first few months of school. We also know that changing negative attitudes is not easy. Nor is it easy for young learners who fall behind their peers, to 'catch up' in their academic achievements. It is wise therefore for us to turn our energy and attention to making sure that the transition to school is both successful and stimulating for children of all abilities and aptitudes.

Recently the Victorian Government joined some other Australian states in incorporating pre-school education under the umbrella of the state's education department. "The linking of early childhood services and schools marks the beginning of a new era in the health, wellbeing, learning and development of all Victorian children and young people from birth through to adulthood." (Bronwyn Pike, Minister for Education and Maxine Morand, Minister for Children and Early Childhood Development.)

Unfortunately new policies and programs take time to unfold and we cannot change the outcomes for all children overnight. We can however as teachers and parents increase our awareness of the many school demands and requirements so that we can prepare children for what lies ahead on their school 'journey'.

The focus of this article is to examine what kinds of language children need to make the important first steps into learning and literacy. In addition we will provide suggestions to facilitate language development. We will discuss **three broad areas of language needed for school success** – meta-language, literate language and genre-specific language.

It may seem obvious that good language skills are linked with school success. A child needs to be able to communicate with other children to make friends and settle in to life in the classroom. They also need to be able to understand and follow what the teacher says as this is a crucial starting point to learning. But being a "good talker" is not enough to guarantee school success. As children progress through school they have to master new and important aspects of language.

Meta-language

This refers to the ability to think and talk about language. Before going to school, children mostly use their language unconsciously. They are concerned with getting their meaning across – to ask for something, to tell what has happened or to express how they are feeling. This is natural as the goal of 'making meaning' should always be at the

forefront of our focus when considering language and communication (in general). However, as children learn to read and spell they must learn to examine the very nature of language itself. Nearly everything that goes on in the classroom requires them to develop this conscious reflection about different aspects of language. They will need to understand and talk about sounds, words, sentences and aspects of grammar. They will be asked to explain what a word means and to think of another word with a similar or opposite meaning. As children progress through the primary years they will also be expected to discuss language styles and goals in both written and spoken texts.

English is an alphabetic language – that is, the written form is based on making a match between the letters and the underlying sounds of the spoken language. When children embark on learning to read, they may learn some words by sight, just recalling the pattern of the shape and letter composition of the word. However in order to ‘unlock’ more words, it is essential that children learn the links between the letters and the sounds they represent. This requires a metalinguistic skill called **phonological awareness**.

Phonological awareness is the ability to consciously “tune into” the sounds of spoken language and to talk about them. We must remember that this is not a natural outcome of learning to talk. When we speak, we do so in a continuous stream of sound – not even pausing between words. Many of us will recall hearing a foreign language and ‘believing’ that there were no individual words. This is because it is the understanding of the meaning of words that enables us to identify the boundaries of those words.

Learning about sounds and letters is a very abstract process but is an important milestone that children need to achieve. Not only is it a learned skill, it is influenced by maturation and experience. Children with well developed speech and language and thinking skills will be in a better position to develop awareness of the sounds within words and then link these to the written symbols or letters used in written English.

At home, at childcare or when children first enter school, we can prepare them for the **meta-language** milestone.

- Talk about words and their features – a funny word, a long word, a made-up word, a nonsense word, a little word.
- Clap out the syllables or beats of the child’s favourite long word or nonsense word. For example, “tri-ant-ee-want-ee-gong”!
- Point out other words that start with the same sound as the child’s name or make up an alliterative phrase about him/her. For example Daisy. Delicious Daisy.
- Listen and learn songs that show how the sounds and letters match up. Busy baby b b b or Helicopter hovering h h h (Oxford Essential Reading - Sound Starters or the Singing Alphabet)
- Let the child help you make and ‘read’ notes or lists – shopping, to do, ingredients for a recipe, or a note for daddy.
- Read to your child regularly. Point out the title, the author’s name. Show where we start reading, and how we read left to write.
- Use magnetic letters and show how to spell the child’s name.

Literate language.

We can best describe this as our 'dressed up' or more formal language. It is different from the casual type of language we use when we share time and first hand experiences with our family and friends. It is the kind of language we might find in books or talks or documentaries on TV. We use a more literate style of language whenever those listening to us have not shared the experience we are speaking about or are not familiar with our topic. Literate language requires specific vocabulary use, logical organization of information and complex sentence structure.

Obviously young children are not skilled with **literate language** when they first start school but they will learn, with our help, how to express themselves using more complex sentences and sophisticated words.

We can promote the use of a more **literate style of language** at home and at school.

- Point out the 'dressed up' language in children's favourite storybooks. Explain the meaning of the vocabulary used and make suggestions of other words that mean the same. For example, "He lifted his arm to *peer* at the *luminous* face of his wrist watch." "His father *released* the oars and looked back." (First Light by Gary Crew, Lothian 1993)
- Provide opportunities for children to retell their 'news', for example to a visiting grandparent.
- Play word games. For example, taking turns to think of words to describe the neighbor's dog – loud, annoying, lonely, attention seeking.
- Discuss words that describe what people are thinking. These words are called **cognitive verbs** and provide clues about why people act and react in certain ways. Examples include think, know, understand, wonder, decide, imagine, wish.

Genre Specific language.

Every day we use our language for different purposes such as to entertain, report, explain, describe or perhaps tell a story. To help our listeners or readers we organize and structure what we want to say and we choose certain features of language such as time words, or past tense 'ed' that will help us to get our message across.

For example, if I started saying "Once upon a time many years ago there was a little girl called .." the chances are that you would have immediately recognized that I was about to tell you a story (narrative). Alternatively, if I had said "You will need two oranges, a bottle of lemonade and a knife and chopping board ..., you may confidently predict that I was about to give you instructions for a recipe.

In school children will need to talk and write using these different genres. We can help them by giving them opportunities to practice these **language genres** (forms) during play activities.

- Let the child give you instructions as to how to get to kinder, to the shops or park.

- Help the child make up rules for a game and then tell someone how to play. (instructing)
- Encourage the child to tell dad or gran what happened on the weekend or at the party. Use some props to help. (recounting)
- Utilize "Make believe" role play games – pretend you are the bus driver, the waiter at a restaurant, the school teacher or the interviewer on TV, and talk about what kinds of things they say. (discussing)
- Use photos of the holiday to tell others about it. (reporting) Children might have more to say if you prompt with some aspect of the holiday. For example, "Describe your favourite day." "Tell about the funny thing that happened on the way home." (describing)
- After sharing a story together, ask the child to make up a different ending, or imagine what might happen in the next book or chapter (storytelling).

Even though we have busy daily routines, as well as family and work demands it is very important to make time to engage children in two-way dialogue. This language interaction needs to go beyond the necessities of routine and social niceties. It needs to give opportunities for discussion and thinking, for learning new words or concepts and for reflecting on language. When we do this children will feel valued and respected. Importantly they will also gain vital language skills that will benefit them throughout their school years.