

TAKING TIME FOR TALKING - the important step to literacy

Young children enjoy talking!

When observing **toddlers**, one of the first things you will notice is how busy they are. As toddlers explore their world they are "practising" motor skills - bending, walking, running, balancing, creeping. They are also busy being what some describe as "fiddle fingers" - touching, tasting, pushing, opening, banging and so on. Another very important part of toddlers' busy day is learning language. Toddlers use language to gain your attention, to ask for things, to comment, to label things and to accompany their many actions, both gross and fine. At times youngsters seems to be engaged in a "running commentary" of their very busy day. It is a busy day for those adults around the toddler too! Some toddlers almost insist that we stop and "Take time for talking". They demand that we look, give, answer, tell and 'stay'! Others seem more self sufficient and demand less of adults. However ALL toddlers will benefit from us 'Taking Time for Talking'.

Some tips for talking with your toddler.

- Find time in the schedule of your busy day to give undivided attention to talking and/playing with your child.
- Follow the child's lead when she/he initiates the time/topic of conversation or the idea for play.
- Involve your child in a variety of experiences. These can be quite 'ordinary' tasks like matching up socks, wiping benches, filling the dog's water bowl.
- Remember that your comments as well as your questions will engage your child.
- Be animated in your interaction - using facial expression and intonation in your own speech to assist understanding and engagement.
- Be sincere as you talk with your child. They will know if you are only pretending to listen!
- Accept all responses and attempts to communicate - eye contact, smiling, pointing as well as language.
- Share a book - one with a story or one with just pictures. Relax and enjoy it together. Pointing and commenting at this stage is often less threatening than a barrage of questions.
- Young children will learn language as they move and sing. Enjoy action rhymes and songs together.

At Preschool, kindergarten or daycare children's world expands rapidly. There are different routines to get used to and a wealth of new experiences both outside and inside. There are friendships to establish, and new adults to ask or tell. Pre-school

children seem to be 'driven' to explore and discover as they immerse themselves in the "business of play" and language growth at this time reflects this. Vocabulary growth in the 3-5 year age group is remarkable, as is the increase in complexity of how sentences are put together. Adults at this time might think that language development is 'self-running' and will proceed whatever we do - or don't do. We must remember however, that the preschooler as well as the toddler, needs you to 'Take time for talking'.

Talking tips for the pre-school child

In addition to the tips for talking with your toddler

- Provide materials for play. These do not have to be expensive! A collection of odd objects in a bucket, 'junk' mail pamphlets and scissors and glue, some dress-up clothes from the Op. shop. Stay for a while and talk, following the child's lead as she/he decides what to do.
- Add something new to routine play materials. E.g. peppercorns to the playdough, corks with faces on them in the sandpit, material pieces with the Lego. Respond to the child's comments as discoveries are made and provide new vocabulary and explanations.
- Enjoy your child's favourite book. It is valuable for you to read and re-read the same favourite story. Repetition teaches children about how stories "work" and frees them to think about broader and deeper issues in the story and how these might relate to their own experiences.
- Ask questions that probe thinking and do not necessarily have a 'right' or 'wrong' answer. Such questions might begin with - *What do you think about ...? Why do you think ---- did that?*
- Allow sufficient time for your child to respond to a question or to organize what they wish to say.
- Show an interest in words and explain what words mean.
- Re-cast what your child says using correct and expanded grammar, emphasizing in a natural way the 'corrected' part. E.g. "*The boy falled down*" - you say "*Yes, he fell down. The boy fell down and he hurt his leg.*"

Beginning school brings further demands on young children's developing language.

At School children have to -

1. Sit still and listen to large "chunks" of talking.
2. Follow instructions given by the teacher, often about unfamiliar tasks.
3. Learn the 'rules' of who is allowed to talk in the classroom, when and for how long.
4. Understand and talk about events which have not been shared with the listeners.
5. Think and talk about words and other aspects of language talking.

Point 4 - Talking about events not shared with the listener.

Very young children use language to express events that are "here and now". This is also the nature of many of our conversations. Language accompanies action/play and is understood by people close-by. The topic of conversation is physically present or is

very familiar to the listener. The speaker often hesitates, uses gesture or 'filler' words such as 'stuff' or 'you know'. Those listening can interrupt and ask for clarification so the urgency to use precise vocabulary is reduced. The language in such exchanges is mainly in the present tense and is concrete and simple in its structure. This type of language is often described as more **oral in style**.

When children begin school, they are often called upon to recount things that happened at a time and in a place where the listeners were not present. Language has to describe and explain events that are "there and then"- away from the current context. Demands on language are far greater in these situations. The speaker must use words to put the listener "in the picture". Vocabulary choice has to be more precise and ideas connected in a logical order so that the sequence of events can be understood.

This type of language is described as a more **literate style**. You will recognize that this is the type of language that we find in books - both picture story books and novels. The author must use precise vocabulary and embed ideas in logically flowing sentences to convey the details and the essence of the story.

Some features of literate language include -

- Conjunctions - to connect ideas
 - for time e.g. and, then, after that, next
 - for cause e.g. but, so because
- adverbs/ adverbial phrases - to describe when, where and how things happened
 - when? e.g. late last night
 - where? e.g. at the bottom of the ocean
 - how? e.g. carefully, cautiously
- adjectives/adjectival phrases to provide descriptions of people and things

Such descriptions can occur both before and after the person/thing being described e.g. the *wrinkled old man*, the boy *with the dyed hair*
the *longest fuzziest scarf*, the dinner was *cold and unappealing*
- verbs to describe thoughts and feelings

These are important to understanding why people act the way they do - i.e. their motivation. It includes words such as - *know, decide, understand, wonder, feel, think, remember*
- specific, varied and colourful vocabulary
 - words to describe how people say things e.g. growled, shouted, queried

- action words that give specific rather than general meaning e.g. gobbled/ate, peeped/looked,
- names of parts as well as wholes e.g. prickles/plants, ibis/bird

In addition, the literate style in books will often include

- direct speech
- repetition for emphasis
- conventional story starters and ending such as *Once upon a time*
- complex sentence structure that embeds many ideas using some or all of the features described above.

It is important to realize that the literate style of language is not reserved for the written word. By "Taking time for talking" we will assist children to make the transition to a more literate style of spoken language. This will then support them as they learn to understand, read and write stories but will also prepare them to be eloquent speakers.

Talking tips to stimulate literate language

- Give children opportunities to talk about past events using photos and other memorabilia to prompt them.
- Ask your child to retell a favourite story.
- Stimulate discussion about the story using some of the 'thinking' verbs e.g. Why did *decide* to leave the party? I *wonder* what you would do.
- Talk about words - what they mean, which words mean something similar, is there another meaning for the word?
e.g.the gate *groaned* In this context the word might be referring to creaking or squeaking noises. When people groan they are usually complaining about something. Do you think that the gate is complaining?
- Provide activities to encourage children to "wrap the nouns" (Sue Galletely - Learning Difficulties Australia Bulletin) - adding something before and after a noun. E.g. I saw a man. I saw an old man. I saw an old man near the tree. I saw an old man near the drooping tree. I saw an old man near the drooping tree in the back garden.
- Prompt or scaffold your children's efforts with maintaining explanations or descriptions.
 - Ask questions to lead the discussion on - e.g. Why was he feeling so sad?
 - Repeat and/or re-word what has been said and provide a joining word to lead on to the next idea e.g. You went to the museum on the school bus but you were late getting there *because*

Driving in the car, walking home from school, having dinner, reading a story - all are excellent places for "Taking time for talking". Both you and your child will be rewarded for your efforts.