



Children Need Rich Language Experiences

by Elizabeth Jones

Human beings are the animals that talk. Everywhere, they have invented languages with which to remember experiences, plan ahead, and communicate with each other. A child's learning to talk — and, later, to recognize print as talk written down — is a major milestone in her relationships with her family and community; she becomes a "member of the club" of people who use words with each other. If she goes to child care, the adults there will determine, in large part, the language experiences she has during her day, even though they won't be participants in all of those experiences.

Adults greet children. Friendly words are an important welcome to each child, each day; children need to hear their names spoken warmly. They need to see their names written, as well; children learn to recognize the shape of their name, and thus to read it, long before they know the sounds of the letters it's made of.

Adults engage children in conversation. Genuine questions (to which the child knows the answer and the adult doesn't) about family events spark conversation just as they do among adults: "Is your grandma visiting you?" "Is your baby better today?" "Is that a new jacket?" When the child takes the initiative — "My birthday's tomorrow!" — the adult responds with shared pleasure.

Adults give children information they want or need — "The red paper is on the bottom shelf." "It's time to wash your hands now." "Mama will come back; she always comes back."

Adults provide experiences worth talking about, and many opportunities for children to talk spontaneously with each other. These experiences include both the daily — things to play with, food to eat — and the

special — celebrations and field trips and attention to street repairs and thunderstorms and things that break down and have to be fixed. Planned or unexpected, all such things are potential language curriculum.

Adults model useful language while mediating conflicts.

"Marcos, what do you want to tell Dulcie?" the teacher asks.

"I don't like her. She's a dumb-dumb," sobs Marcos.

"You're mad at Dulcie. Can you tell her what she did to make you mad?"

"Hit me," says Marcos, sadly.

"You hit me first," says Dulcie, reasonably.

"Marcos, did you hit Dulcie?"

He nods.

"Why?"

"My hole!" he wails. "She messed my hole!" He tries to hit Dulcie again.

"What hole?" asks Dulcie, genuinely puzzled. "I didn't mess no hole."

"Can you show Dulcie your hole, Marcos?"

"Here!" he shouts. "It was right here, and I digged it and digged it. . . ." (Jones and Reynolds, 1992, p. 27)



Adults read stories from books. Books are a source of delight, wisdom, and useful information. Children being read to and looking at books themselves discover that literacy is a skill worth mastering.

Adults share songs, chants, and poems, play games with words, and respond appreciatively to children's word play. Language is a set of sound patterns as well as of meanings, and spontaneous play with its rhymes and rhythms is one of the many ways children begin to learn the phonics useful in reading.

Adults re-tell to children the stories of their lives together, letting them know that *their* actions and words are the stuff of stories too.

"Once upon a time," said Joan to her small class of three year olds, whom she had called into a snug circle as their going camping play was coming to an end, "there were one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight children who went camping together." "Me!" said Charlie excitedly. "Me, too!" said Alicia. . . . (Jones and Reynolds, 1992, p. 125)

Adults set the stage for children's own storytelling, keeping in mind that young children are not at their most competent when they're expected to talk in teacher-directed settings like show-and-tell or recall. Children's language is liveliest when their bodies are in action and they haven't been waiting for a turn. Nor are all their stories told in words; *The Hundred Languages of Children* (Edwards et al., 1993) includes dramatic play, block construction, drawing and painting, and many more. In all these modes, children represent their understandings of how the world works and where they belong in it:

"Here's the driving place. These go with the car. No, get off, I have to drive. We have to get our cars fixed. I have to drive, this is 'mergency."

"Hey, help do this, fireman. This is gonna be a hook and ladder to catch people. This goes on the fire truck 'cause that's the water."

Adults respect the importance of private speech in early development. Young children talk to themselves as they go about their daily activities, using language as a means of directing their own attention and behavior. (Berk and Winsler, 1995) It's important that children not be shushed very often; they need to think out loud.

Adults respect children's home language. The child whose family speaks a language not spoken by the child

care staff isn't language-deprived, he's potentially bilingual; and bilingualism is an asset in a diverse and changing world. Staff need to learn basic vocabulary in the other language, just as children do, and staff hiring policies should take the community's languages into account.

Adults stay alert to naturally occurring opportunities to teach concepts and vocabulary to children, rather than *playing teacher* in developmentally inappropriate group lessons like this one:

There were 19 four year olds sitting in square formation around the edge of the rug.

Teacher (showing tray): "What do you think is in this?"

Some children: "Lemons."

Teacher: "How do you think lemons taste?"

Some children: "Sour."

Teacher passes tray. The first few children don't want a lemon.

Teacher (somewhat impatiently): "Oh taste it. It's fun to taste; you just need to lick it."

Teacher (tastes lemon): "Mmm, it is sour. What else is something that tastes sour?"

A child: "Apples."

Teacher: "Sometimes, but not all the time. Green ones can taste sour. What else?"

A child (echoed by others): "Grapes."

Teacher: "Grapes really aren't sour, although sometimes they aren't real sweet. How about pickles?" (Daniels, 1988, p. 137)

Here the teacher, continually fishing for the answers she wanted while denying the validity of the children's ideas, got much more language practice than they did. If the taste of things is important to discuss with children, why not do so at the lunch table, a natural setting for conversations about food as a topic of mutual interest?

Adults acknowledge that face-to-face talk provides better language experience than TV. Children get enough of TV and videos at home, where adults are busy with other tasks or may want to watch themselves. Further, videos turned on in child care are often arbitrarily turned



off when it's time for something else; they're used as a time filler rather than as a story to be paid attention to from beginning to end. Looking at books would be more appropriate, because children do it at their own pace; however, if book-looking happens only at brief transactions and is never given time as a serious activity, children get the message that it isn't very important.

Adults use transitions as teachable moments both smoothed and enriched by interesting activities. Songs, chants, finger plays, and movement games all focus children's attention and add to their language. Classification games stretch children's thinking as well: If you played in the sand today, raise your hand. If you played in the playhouse, raise your hand. If you played in the blocks, raise your hand. How many boys played in the blocks? How many girls played in the blocks? How come there weren't any girls in the blocks? (With this question, you may well get genuine language experience — lively conversation about a significant issue. If that happens, there goes your smooth transition.)

Games can be designed to move the children to the next activity: "If you're wearing red, stand up and go sit at the table." "If you're wearing stripes, stand up. . . ."

Adults reflect on all the things they do, examining their potential for enriching children's language. They need to remember that play time is the most important language opportunity in the day, and provision for it thoughtfully. Children's language will draw on all their family and community experiences *and* on their experiences in child

care: What's here to talk about, who's here to talk with, and what are the interesting events in our shared past and our anticipated future?

References

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