



Atlanta Speech School

The Importance of Play in the Development of Language Skills

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Play has been called “the work of children” because it is through play that children learn how to interact in their environment, discover their interests, and acquire cognitive, motor, speech, language, and social-emotional skills (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2007). Through various types of play, children learn to discover, create, and problem solve in a safe, caring environment. As children grow and mature, their play skills also change, allowing for the development of new skills that are more varied and complex. It is important to acknowledge that there is variability in play development and these stages often overlap. However, at any stage, parents can play an important role in helping to facilitate growth of language skills that are important for later social and learning experiences.

The Developmental Stages of Play in Early Childhood

Infants

Infants learn through the experiences they have with objects and people. During infancy, sensory-motor experiences that lead to skill development may occur “accidentally” during play. However, these experiences contribute to a child’s development. While exploring the environment, a child may be waving his arms and hit a rattle. The sound that the rattle makes teaches the infant about the sensory properties of objects in his world and the effect he can have on objects. The infant begins to understand that his hands are tools for interacting with the environment. As the infant’s reaching and grasping become more purposeful, and not just accidental, the infant soon discovers cause/effect relationships. Prior to the emergence of oral communication, infants often engage in non-verbal communication with their play partners. For example, they exchange eye-gaze and facial expressions with their caregivers (e.g., baby smiles and parent smiles back). As infants begin to produce sounds (i.e., coo, babble), their communication partners usually imitate these sounds or respond positively, reinforcing the infant’s understanding of the effect his behavior has on other individuals. Thus, the child produces more sounds in order to create a response from the caregiver. This emergence of reciprocal interactions is a foundation for later social skill development (McLean, Bailey, & Wolery, 1996).

Toddlers

While toddlers play, they are developing the foundations for successful social, communication, motor, and academic skills. Therefore, it is important to facilitate engagement in positive and educational play activities. The development of verbal language at this time has an impact on developing play skills. Toddlers begin to imitate the language and behavior of others and engage in make-believe play (McLean et al., 1996). They also begin to demonstrate increasing independence and are more likely to demonstrate parallel play (i.e., playing near others, but not with them). A simple game of rolling a ball back and forth begins to develop the idea of turn-taking, which is important for developing conversational and interactive play skills.

Preschoolers

The growth of language and cognitive skills during the preschool years leads to more complex imaginary play. At this age, children engage in more make-believe play and move from parallel play to cooperative play with peers (McLean et al., 1996). Make-believe play may involve dress-up, acting out past events the child has experienced, or dressing and feeding a doll. Increasing creativity and imagination are also evident in play activities, as a stick suddenly becomes a sword and the child, a pirate. An increasing

curiosity about the environment results in greater interest in understanding how things are the same or different. Children at this age may enjoy sorting objects into meaningful groups or creating simple crafts. An understanding of turn-taking and increased attention span allows children at this age to also begin to play simple board games.

How to Facilitate Language Development Through Play

Play activities are an important part of your child's life, and your child will want you to be a part of these activities. While there are times when an older child may prefer to play with peers, setting aside some time to play with your child can promote a close relationship and allow you to provide a model for the values and behavior that are important to your family. This is also an opportunity to help your child develop important language skills in fun and supportive situations. Pepper and Weitzman (2004) recommend the following strategies:

Follow your child's lead - An individual's interest level often determines how engaged he becomes in a given activity. Therefore, it is important to become observers of your child's play and engage them in play activities that they find interesting. Increased child engagement allows greater opportunities for language acquisition.

Practice turn taking - Establishing successful turn-taking routines will facilitate social and communicative skill development in young children. Turn taking is a skill that can easily be promoted through play with children of any age. Offering a brief pause when it is his turn will increase your child's initiation, communication, and independence. During play, parents can facilitate turn taking by cooing at a baby and waiting for a response and then cooing back. With toddlers or preschoolers, you can take turns stacking blocks. Older children can take turns formally through organized games such as certain sports or board games. Techniques to facilitate turn taking include: using facial expressions, body language (e.g., making eye contact and waiting, gesturing for the child's response), and asking questions.

Be a model and an expander - Modeling language for your child provides exposure to new vocabulary and correct grammar while speaking. Play is an excellent opportunity for a child to attach meaning to words and build vocabulary. Providing accurate language input can include commenting about what you or your child are doing, adding a word or phrase to the child's short phrases, exposing your child to synonyms, or by modeling the correct sentence structure. This will depend on the stage of language development of the child. Examples include the following:

Child: "car"	Parent: "Yes, a big car"
Child: "car"	Parent: "Go, car, go!"
Child: "He goed fast."	Parent: "Yes, he went fast."
Child: "Mom, that's a huge truck!"	Parent: "You're right. It's enormous!"

Sing songs - Singing songs is a fun, interactive way for young children to learn language. Songs can include well-known children's songs like "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" or can be made up to fit whatever you and your child are doing at the time (e.g., cleaning up, eating snack, playing in the yard, getting dressed). Singing songs provides increased exposure to vocabulary through repetition and creates opportunities for turn taking. Turn taking can be accomplished by allowing your child to fill in key words in the songs. Singing the songs slowly and singing them along with actions are ways to increase language acquisition. When music is paired with actions, children also have the opportunity to practice listening skills as well as motor skills (e.g., Hokey Pokey).

Allow opportunities for repetition - Repetition builds mastery in all areas of development. Although repeating the same activity may appear boring or unproductive to us as adults, it serves to refine and stabilize skills for children. Therefore, children should be encouraged to repeat routines, actions, and words, particularly those they enjoy. Repetition of words or phrases helps to build vocabulary and expressive language. Children often like to read the same book repeatedly. Through repeated book reading, children have the opportunity to share in the reading, master story vocabulary, develop a sense of story sequence, and begin to make predictions. Because children learn through repetition, listening to and singing the same songs repeatedly are encouraged. Often, children begin to sing along once they have heard the same song several times. Therefore, repetition of songs can also be used to teach new concepts, new vocabulary, and correct sentence structure.

Read books together - Books are filled with opportunities to facilitate language skills. While reading stories that are familiar to your child, you can develop speech, language, and memory skills. Expose your child to a variety of books and watch to see what books he/she prefers. By following your child's lead, you will capture his attention. Initially, you should read books with simple pictures and simple text. Consider board books, pop-up books, books with textures, and other interactive books. You can borrow books from the library as a "test run" prior to purchasing them. Story time is great for turn-taking. It is common for us to read stories to children with them sitting in our lap, but it is also good to read stories face-to-face. When you are face-to-face with your child he/she is able to observe your non-verbal communication (i.e., facial expression) and is more likely to take turns with an activity.

For young children, it is not necessary to start at the beginning of the book or to read all of the pages in the book. Your child may want to skip pages and just look at the pictures without reading the story. Use this as an opportunity to talk about the pictures. Ask your child questions and make comments about what you see. At this age, the focus of book sharing should be to build the foundations for comprehension (e.g., vocabulary, sequencing, predicting) rather than addressing letter or word identification. Children also enjoy being able to take part in story-telling. By offering a brief pause before reading the last word in a sentence, your child has the opportunity to fill in the anticipated word. You can take turns by reading one page and having your child "read" the next. This technique works well with stories that have repetitive lines.

When reading books with preschoolers you can ask questions requiring the child to develop or practice inferencing skills. This can include topics directly related to the core of the story such as "Do you think Joe's mother will be upset with him for the way he is behaving?" or simple observations such as "What season do you think it must be in the story?" Ask the child to provide reasoning for his answer.

Summary

Play is essentially a child's occupation. Play contributes to the on-going cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being of the developing infant and young child. It is how they make sense of their world. Whether play is purposeful and self-directed, or free and unstructured, it is a dynamic and lifelong process. When parents engage in play activities with their children, they have an opportunity to facilitate and reinforce the growth of their skills across several areas of development.

Helpful Online Resources

www.naeyc.org

www.zerotothree.org

www.pbskids.org/read

www.rightchoiceforkids.org