

Language, Language, Language

Skill with language is the primary underpinning of reading. Children who are good listeners and proficient speakers learn to read more quickly and easily than those who do not have skill in those areas. Solid language skills will provide your young child with a head start for reading.

Fortunately, most parents and care givers nurture their infant's language skills almost automatically. They talk to their babies, imitate the sounds made by the little ones, and talk for them. Parents and care givers make an effort to name objects that attract the baby's interest and later add detail words and descriptions. When the baby says her first words, the adults respond eagerly, make a fuss, and get excited.

A funny thing happens, though, as children begin to grow up. Once the wonder of the new learning wears off, there is often a change in the language exchanges between the adults and the kids. The amount of instructional exchanges and conversation usually drops and the amount of directive language steadily increases. Try this experiment in your own home or classroom. Listen carefully to the interactions between a young child and another adult. Keep track of the purpose of the communication. Is it instructional (teaching or providing information), conversational (chatting about events or opinions), or directive (giving commands or correcting behavior)? You can even monitor your own interactions with children. It is very easy to slip into a pattern of using mostly directive language with kids. Directive language accomplishes goals, but does little for nurturing language skills.

Instead, try being intentional about conversing with the children in your care. Set aside time each day to talk about things that are important in their lives. Try discussing events of the day, favorites, opinions, or whatever seems interesting at the time. You can usually avoid single-word answers by asking open-ended questions instead of the yes-no variety. For example, if you ask, "Did you have a good day at school?" you are likely to receive a quick yes or no for an answer. Even "How was your day?" will often elicit a response of good or OK. Instead, try something like, "What did you do after lunch?" The answer will guide you to the next question, and you have the beginnings of a conversation. Other conversation starters include "What do you think about _____?" "What is your favorite _____?" and "Tell me about _____." The more opportunities that children have to exercise language skills, the stronger they become in this area.

Build even more language skills as you share books with children. Use the pictures in books to their fullest advantage. Children can name and describe the objects in the illustrations, identify characters from the story, and use the pictures to predict what will be happening in the plot. Ask your child to



explain why he thinks the picture was chosen to represent the text or describe how she would illustrate the passage that was just read.

Jokes and riddles offer another avenue for nurturing language skills. Even young children quickly learn to enjoy this playful pastime. Start with simple riddles that describe familiar objects. For example, you could ask a young preschooler to guess "What has a round face, two black hands, and numbers to tell us the time?" With experience and maturity, children begin to appreciate humorous puns, knock-knock jokes, and more. Check your local library for children's joke books that will jog your memory for these gems. And don't forget to enjoy and praise your children's attempts to make up their own jokes! This active and creative form of language play builds many skills and is very important.

With just a little encouragement, children will tell great stories. The abilities to describe events, relate them in order, and connect them together with language are just a few of the skills nurtured by such storytelling. Relating real events helps children to express themselves and organize their thoughts. Retelling familiar stories helps them to build memory and sequencing skills. Telling imaginary stories nourishes creativity and imagination. Often, all that's needed is a willing audience!

You can use your children's stories to build bridges to reading. From time to time, simply write down what your young learner says. Write her words down exactly as she says them, even if she makes an error in grammar. The point of the exercise is to capture her exact words on paper. If you have a computer, type the story using a large, clear font. Otherwise, use block printing. Your child will be pleased to see her words in print! She will be able to recall what she said well enough to read the text. How exciting!

This technique is called Language Experience, and it serves many valuable purposes in reading instruction. Among other things, it will strengthen the connection between printed and spoken words, build concepts about how print works (reading from left to right and top to bottom, the separation of individual words by spaces, and more). Most children also find the activity highly rewarding. Their exact words are preserved for all to see, now AND later.

Language skills are the foundation of reading skills. They are a great place to begin helping your child progress toward independent reading. In addition to the general ideas that have already been presented, there are many games and activities that you can do with your child to build these skills. Here are a few to try:

STORY BAG

This game is suitable for any number. Players must be able to form complete sentences.

Prepare for play by placing several small objects or pictures into a bag. Use more items for larger groups and/or experienced players.

The first player removes an object from the bag and begins a story with at least one sentence about the item. That player passes the bag to the next player, who removes another object. He or she adds to the beginning provided and connects the new object into the story. Play continues as each player chooses a new item and adds to the story. The story can be tape recorded or written down if desired.

LANGUAGE ART

This game is suitable for players who can use descriptive language. Any number can play.

You will need paper and drawing supplies suitable for the size of the group. Choose a familiar object (like a tree) or a fanciful one (like a monster) to draw.

Begin by telling players what drawing will be made. Their job is to give directions to the artist to make the picture a reality. When playing with less-experienced players, try to make the picture turn out as expected by asking questions to guide players language or clarify their desires. For more experienced players, it can be fun to follow their directions exactly. They will learn valuable lessons about being specific!

MAKE A BOOK

This activity is suitable for any number, but may require individual attention to complete. Children must have at least minimal oral language.

You will need paper, scissors, glue, and something to write with. You will also want materials to bind the pages into a book. Old magazines can be used as sources for pictures. For very young children, you may prefer to cut pictures out in advance.

Have the children choose, arrange, and glue pictures onto pages. Write down whatever captions they would like on each page. Young children will name objects, and language will range through descriptive sentences and up to whole stories for more experienced children. Bind the book as securely as possible, because it will get a lot of use!

CAN YOU DO THIS?

This activity is suitable for children who have demonstrated receptive language (listening) skills. Any number can play.

Prepare for this activity by making a list of actions the child or group can do.

Challenge players to follow oral directions. Start by having players complete one action at a time. As they gain experience and confidence, add more actions to the list. For example, the leader may ask the player to "Clap your hands, wave, stamp your feet, and touch something blue." It is important that the child listen to the entire set of directions and then try to follow them. Some children will find it helpful to repeat the directions aloud or to touch a finger for each step.