Intentional early language development

Beginning at birth, language is a portal into the world: to understanding the meaning of things and to communicate. Although many stages in oral language seem to “just happen,” all children need adults who consciously guide and support language development to its fullest extent. This means that combined with adults’ natural interactions with children, they need to intentionally plan for language development.

During the early childhood period (birth through eight) children are absorbing communication and cognitive skills that lay the foundation for later learning and form the brain’s architecture for learning. Research shows that in the first 3 years of life, infants and toddlers begin acquiring the first of thousands of words they will use throughout their lives. Infants become aware of sounds and words being shared around them and start to communicate their own needs. Toddlers begin to talk in simple sentences, ask questions, and share their ideas. Preschoolers develop complex vocabulary from varied language experiences (people, books, and play) in their lives.

Intentional strategies

Oral language has been defined by some as the “engine” of learning and thinking. Many researchers claim that children who hear more words and speech, especially a variety of words, meaningful conversations, and grammatically complex language, have larger vocabularies and better comprehension skills. Facilitating early vocabulary development in child care is critical for early learning, especially for children in poverty settings who hear far fewer words and conversations within their home environments. Intentional planning helps in building successful oral language development and also in decreasing “catch-up” problems that may occur from missed early learning activities and interactions.

According to the National Center for Family Literacy, developing oral language falls into two all encompassing categories – scaffolding and narrative talk. These two practices intertwine in supporting oral language development and can be applied across the curriculum and into any application of working with children.

Narrative talk is the process of adults and children engaged in conversations. It is a way to put together meaningful ideas as stories, and also encourage a deeper understanding of language, such as in explaining the meaning of words. As adults begin to narrate daily happenings, observations, and discoveries, children begin to absorb the process and learn ways in which to become narrators themselves. Narrative talk presents the adult numerous opportunities to expand ideas and intentionally introduce oral language skills. Through narratives, children hear new words, complex grammar, and their own ideas reflected back to them.

Scaffolding gives an opportunity for children to reach higher-level skills by building on and extending their existing skills. Knowledge of early language and literacy general milestones, as well as each child's ability, guide adults in the use of scaffolding during conversations. Adults can support scaffolding skills in many types of intentional learning instructions, such as modeling. Modeling is an intentional way of presenting something children need to learn. Adults can consciously introduce and model new vocabulary that builds on children's existing vocabulary. For example, an adult might respond to a child who says the apple is “yummy” by stating: “Yes, the apple is yummy; it’s delicious!”.
Both scaffolding and narrative talk practices offer the opportunity for metacognition (thinking about one’s own thinking and thought process). Adults can invite children to practice skills that may fall under metacognition, such as visualization (“I remember the book that had a blue train, with smoke coming out of the top, on the front cover. Do you?”), using prediction (“I wonder what will happen to the blue train when he tries to go up that really big hill. What do you think will happen?”), and tapping into prior knowledge (“How will this train go up the hill? What part of the train helps it move and go? Have you ever walked up a really big hill? What was it like?”).

Practices such as scaffolding, narrative talk, and metacognition help children to eventually think about and question their own ideas, as well as learn ways to express them.

Putting strategies into practice: intentional practices to try in oral language development

• Expand language – Practice ways to rephrase what children say by adding further language. For example if a child says, “ball,” you might respond with, “Yes, your ball is round with lots of stars all over it. Do you want to play with the ball? Let’s try rolling the ball on the floor to each other. Ready?”

• Use and encourage self-talk – Describe what you are thinking and doing out loud. “I need to help Jan put her paper on the easel. The clips that hold the paper are challenging to use! I’m wondering if we have enough paint at the easel.”

• Spotlight vocabulary – Focus attention on adding new and interesting words. Use new words in conversations with children; rephrase what they mean, and illustrate new words with pictures.

• Use small groups and one on one interaction – This gives the adult time to focus on what children are thinking and listen to what children say. Adults can respond, extend, and rephrase language and ideas. In small groups adults can also model taking turns, introduce vocabulary, and share grammatically correct language. Smaller groups also allow for personal and relationship-based interactions.

• Plan environments that encourage learning with peers – Try dramatic play, outside play, or art experiences. Be sure there are inspiring and interesting materials to use creatively and collaboratively that spark conversations and interactions.

• Draw on children’s ideas and knowledge – Children are interested in things that are personal to them, such as their family, friends, and interests. Plan activities and time for discussion around these ideas.

• Help children learn to use metacognition skills such as visualizing, tapping into prior knowledge (“Earlier this morning Sam wanted the car you were using. How did you work it out?”), and generating open-ended questions.

• Apply print awareness (concepts of print and alphabet knowledge), alphabet knowledge (letter recognition, sound understandings), and phonological awareness (ability to hear and manipulate sounds within words) within planning ideas.

References
What Works: An Introductory Teacher Guide for Early Language and Emergent Literacy Instruction, National Center for Family Literacy
Learning to Talk and Listen, An oral language resource for early childhood caregivers, National Institute for Literacy
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