Developing memory

“I was thinking backwards when my Pappy was here” —Anna Pearl, age 3, describing a memory

From the first breath of life, the opportunity to think backwards, or to develop memory, begins. It is important that professionals have an understanding of memory and memory capacity. A child’s memory capacity isn’t necessarily the size of their memory, but rather how much children can do with their memory. Although young children are extremely capable in many ways, their memory capacity is limited in early memory development.

While research has demonstrated that very young children can recall memories with specific details, for memories to become autobiographical, or rather, part of the child’s life story and real to them, there must first be a developed sense of self and personal identity. Children do not fully develop a sense of self until typically around 1½ or 2 years of age. Having a sense of self, the “I” separate from others, gives a place for memory to be organized and develop personal meaning.

Although memory is not fully developed in infancy, the early childhood period (birth through age 8) is important in building and acquiring the development of memory. Looking at memory development provides a new way to think about and plan for children. Memory development not only takes you back to experiences that hold meaning, but it is a complex cognitive ability that is important in many aspects of thinking and learning, such as language and literacy, planning, following directions, problem solving, reflecting, imagining, and the overall ability to form a positive sense of self.

Remembering begins with understanding. Children learn about memory by talking with others and by experiencing life events within their environments. If children experience events that they do not fully understand, they are less likely to remember the event (or to recall events correctly). Adults play a significant role in helping children understand and remember. The most important role for adults is providing responsive, joyful, and nurturing interactions with children. Another important, yet simple way adults can help is by telling stories and narrating experiences, especially experiences they have shared with children. By doing so, the adult can revisit events, provoke thought, and even help children recall what they cannot remember. In essence, the adult is reconstructing the shared memory.
Fostering language

Language bridges understanding and helps in shaping memory. Adults can foster language with children by telling stories, retelling events, and asking questions that relate to experiences children have had. Questions that tap into the what, where, when, why, and how help children gather details, descriptions, and emotions about the experience. Eventually children will ask themselves the same types of questions that the adults have been asking. As children look inward, ask questions, and try to understand their own thoughts, they are forming memories.

Fostering imagination

In order for children to be able to imagine, they must use information that is stored in the brain (things they remember and understand). When imagining occurs, there is a recombining of details in a new way. Along with fostering language, adults can cultivate children’s imaginative play by using props, materials, and photographs—anything to spark a connection to both past memories and to form newly imagined ideas. Drawing tools and materials are also a good support for documenting, organizing, and illustrating past and forthcoming ideas.

Guiding behavior

To follow directions and remember classroom rules, children must be able to process information. To process information, children need to categorize, understand, and respond to the message that an adult gives them. Before they can process the message, all parts of the message must be understood. Because children have limited memory spans, they may miss part of the message, or even all of it, if they have to process too many things at once.

Adults can help children to remember and do what is asked of them by giving directions that are uncomplicated and stated effectively, such as “Please put the books on the bookshelf” as opposed to “Let’s clean up.” Use clear directives of what to do as opposed to what not to do. For example, it is better to ask children to “please walk” as opposed to “no running”.

It also helps when adults clearly explain the “why” of a direction. For example, when children are asked to put the books away, professionals might explain that, “We need to put our books back on the shelf so we can find them tomorrow.” The child doesn’t have to use any memory to wonder why they have to put the books away and can focus on the task and not the “why”.

Routines, such as clean-up, can also help children form memory. By repeating behaviors, children’s knowledge base increases and becomes more organized. Through repetitive routines, children can fully process information. Responses are remembered and become more automatic. Keep routines simple and consistent. Break activities into steps and introduce steps gradually.

A look at memory development helps practitioners provide intentional opportunities for children to begin to think backwards, to develop effective memory, acquire skills in all developmental domains, and also provides resources to grow meaningful life stories to share.

References:

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