

by Janie F. Haywood and J. Helen Perkins

# Smart talk

**Improving children's  
oral language**

**W**e must continue to create a nation of readers. The skills needed for reading begin to develop in early childhood as children acquire oral language. Oral language refers to talking, listening, taking part in conversation, and understanding stories, for example.

Early childhood teachers and caregivers play a critical role in children's language development. By engaging children in oral language activities, we lay the foundation that will enable children to learn to read and write.

## **Oral language precedes reading**

Children begin to acquire language the day they are born. Their cries, their ability to distinguish sounds, and their coos and babbles are all beginning attempts at language. Their language continues to dramatically develop during their first three years (Savage, 2000).

According to Morrow, Strickland and Woo (1998), children imitate the language of

adults and create their own when needed. Children will continue to use language when their attempts are positively reinforced.

During their early years, children need supportive adults who will engage them in conversation, read to them, and provide experiences in which they can learn new words (IRA and NAEYC, 1998). Children also need adult role models for reading and writing activities—reading the newspaper and writing a note to parents, for example. Children with these experiences will have a tremendous head start when they begin school.

Oral language precedes a child's acquisition of reading skills such as *phonemic awareness* and *comprehension* (Reutzel and Cooter, 2003). *Phonemic awareness* is the ability to recognize the smallest units of speech sounds, and *comprehension* is the ability to understand what is read—identifying the story's main character or retelling a story that was read aloud, for example.



## Talking leads to learning

Children must have a *receptive* (listening) and *expressive* (talking) use of oral language so they can become successful readers (Clay, 1979). Talking to children helps build their vocabulary. *Oral vocabulary* refers to words children recognize in speaking or listening (National Reading Panel, 2000).

Children learn the meanings of most words indirectly; meaningful talk is powerful (CIERA, 2001). Children between the ages of 2 and 6 learn an average of 6 to 10 new words a day (Reutzel and Cooter, 2000). They learn these

words through everyday experiences. They learn not only by talking with adults but also talking with other children.

Children also learn words by having books read to them. When 4- to 5-year-old children hear a single book reading, their expressive vocabulary significantly improves (Senechal and Cornell, 1993). Reading the same story several times allows children to hear adults repeat new words and to review words they find intriguing.

The size of children's spoken vocabulary is important. They will use the words from their oral language to make sense of the words they will read in text. In hearing *Little Bear's Friend*, for example, 4-year-old Jacob might recall how he made a new friend on vacation. The more children's oral language mirrors the written language they encounter, the more successful they will likely be in reading (National Reading Panel, 2000; Bridge, 1978).

When texts relate to oral language experiences, children quickly discover that written and oral language are parallel forms of language that serve similar purposes for communication (Reutzel and Cooter, 2000).

### Rich oral environment serves as scaffold

Teachers and caregivers can provide a *scaffold* for improving children's oral language. In simplest terms, a scaffold provides support for children while they are learning.

For example, an 11-month-old child is just beginning to walk but still falls sometimes. Her father reaches out his hand to help her to walk to her destination. She's



excited because with his help she is able to walk without falling. She will need her father's hand for only a while; she will be able to walk by herself soon and no longer need the scaffold, or support, from her father.

More specifically, scaffolding is an adult-child collaboration that fosters cognitive growth, or learning (Berk and Winsler, 1995). For example, a 2-year-old points at the refrigerator and says, "Juice." While Ms. Haywood is opening the door, she says, "Crystal wants some juice." She takes out the juice and gives it to the child: "Here's some apple juice." The child is happy because she has what she wanted.

In this example, Ms. Haywood has provided a scaffold. She is saying in a complete sentence what the child will eventually say on her own. Ms. Haywood is also using standard English, not baby talk. By providing this support, Ms. Haywood is helping the child develop oral language and eventually become a reader.

Extending or rephrasing a child's attempts at speaking is one aspect of an environment rich in oral-language opportunities. Equally important is actively listening to children. Stopping what you are doing, gaining eye

#### A sampling of pre-reading skills

- Understands the function of a book.
- Recognizes that print represents spoken language.
- Recognizes that words represent names of people and things.
- Distinguishes letters from words.
- Recognizes that words are separated by spaces.
- Follows words left to right and from top to bottom.
- Understands that the sequence of letters in a written word represents the sequence of sounds (phonemes) in a spoken word (alphabetic principle).
- Demonstrates phonemic awareness by rhyming, clapping syllables, and substituting sounds.
- Matches sounds to alphabetic letters.
- Recognizes and names most uppercase and lowercase letters of the alphabet.
- Uses picture clues to aid understanding of story content.

contact, waiting until the child has finished, and occasionally rephrasing what the child has said helps the child feel heard. Active listening by an adult encourages a child to talk more, to try unfamiliar words, and to experiment with sounds.

Another important element of a rich oral-language environment is reading to children. Children love hearing stories and are fascinated

with the sounds of words. They will grow up connecting books and reading with warm, pleasant times. They will also imitate the reading habits of adults around them.

Discussing stories will help children understand how meaning is made. It will help them to understand the story and make their own meaning. Discussing stories will also help children to understand story elements such as plot, characters, theme, problem, and solution. (See box at left for more reading tips.)

### Use books to stimulate oral language

- Always have available a variety of books.
- Choose high-quality books about topics such as animals, places, and things that children like.
- Choose books that positively reflect children's identity, home language, and culture.
- Discuss the story before, during, and after reading.
- Discuss the title and what might happen in the story. Encouraging the children to make predictions stretches their thinking and imagination.
- Point to the pictures and talk about them.
- Help children relate words to their prior knowledge and experiences such as taking a bath, eating, or playing outdoors.
- Read in a natural way, as if you were talking. Use expression by changing your voice tone with each character. Use hand and body gestures.
- Pause to explain unfamiliar words.
- Encourage parents to take advantage of times in the doctor's waiting room and at the laundromat by talking and reading to the children.

### Offer oral-language activities

A rich environment enhances children's language development indirectly. You can also enhance development directly by providing activities aimed specifically at improving oral language skills.

### Infants and toddlers

- **Read:** Read to infants for at least 30 minutes a day. Read stories or poems. While reading, position your mouth or face where the infant can see it. While reading to toddlers, encourage them to turn the pages.
- **Talk:** Talk to infants about what you are doing. Talk about changing the diaper, washing hands, and putting on shoes, for example. Use short and simple sentences.
- **Name surrounding objects:** Pronounce the names of objects that surround the baby such as bottle, diapers, and table. The baby will begin to connect the sound of the word to the object.
- **Look and listen:** Talk about what you see and hear. When a baby drops a spoon, for example, say, "Did you hear that? Your spoon hit the floor."

- **Give simple directions:** Give a toddler simple directions and recognition for completing the task. "Please go and get your cap." "Yes! You got your cap. Now you can put it on your head."
- **Provide toys:** Have stuffed animals, puppets, and other toys available for children because playing with them will encourage children to talk.
- **Play "Follow the Leader":** Encourage children to follow you around the room and name each object you touch.
- **Talk about family pictures:** Ask parents to send a family photograph (one they need not have returned), and encourage children to talk about it.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** Frame questions so they require the child to answer with several words, not yes or no. Ask questions such as "If you wanted to have more fun in this play yard, how would you change it?" and "What did you do at your grandmother's house yesterday?" Be sure to listen while the child talks. A rule of thumb is to begin questions with "wh" words. Questions that begin with *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, and *why* (and *how*) encourage children to talk and to begin to explain their answers. They will use more words. Sometimes they will use words they didn't know were in their vocabulary.

### Preschoolers

- **Provide props:** Place props in the dramatic play center or use at circle time. A dentist kit, for example, may encourage children to talk about their experiences in going to the dentist.

- **Discuss art work:** Encourage children to discuss their creations: "Tell me about your painting." "How did you feel while making this collage?"
- **Talk while playing:** Encourage children to talk while playing in the block building and dramatic play centers; these activities are interactive and collaborative. While children are playing and talking, their vocabulary will improve because they hear themselves and remember some of the words they have heard adults use.
- **Play "Objects in a Bag":** Place a few items such as a cap, plastic cup, and spoon into a bag. Have the child pull an object from the bag and talk about it. The child can describe the object and talk about how it's used.
- **Record sounds in nature:** Tape record sounds from outdoors. While playing sounds such as birds, moving vehicles, and dogs barking, encourage children to talk about what they hear. Encourage children to write about or draw pictures representing the sounds they hear.
- **Solve a puzzle:** While working with a child to solve a puzzle, talk about the pieces, colors, and shapes. Encourage conversation.
- **Take field trips:** Expose children to a variety of experiences by visiting the zoo, library, park, and museum. Encourage children to make comments and to ask questions. Encourage children to tell their families about their trip.
- **Read or tell a story every day.** Vary the reading format, using books as well as flannel board and puppets, for example. Have a well-stocked book center that children can use on their own.
- **Tape a story:** Read a story and record it on tape. Make the tape available for children to play and enjoy as many times as they want.
- **Encourage pantomime:** Encourage a child to retell their favorite story or pretend to be a character from the book in front of a mirror.
- **Play a rhyme game:** Say "Ball rhymes with call." Spell out the words—"Ball, b-a-l-l and call, c-a-l-l." Encourage the child to say the words to feel and hear how they rhyme.
- **Sing:** Sing songs and chants. Be ready to sing the same songs over and over.
- **Read labels:** Help children to read the labels on items. Make labels for objects in the classroom, such as "wastebasket," "door," "blocks," and "paint."
- **Provide writing materials:** Encourage children to write by making available materials such as a variety of paper, pencils, non-toxic crayons, paints and brushes, and washable markers. Set up a special place for reading and writing.
- **Dictate a story:** Have the child dictate a story to you while you write what the child says.
- **Write notes:** Write the child a note, such as "Wow! You caught the ball three times today." Read the note to the child in an expressive way.
- **Loan books from your library:** Set up a book lending program so children can take books home to read with their families. Oral language activities lay the foundation for future literacy learning. By providing a rich oral-language environment,



engaging children in responsive conversation, and reading to them, you will help children acquire the skills they need to read and write.

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