



Cultivating Child Development Series

Language Development

Language is a tool for social communication and logical thinking. Children develop their language skills at their own pace, both genetic and environmental factors are equally conducive to language development. Apart from having normal hearing and cognitive ability, good attention and communication intent are also important for language development. Furthermore, parents play a crucial role in providing a language-rich environment in order to benefit their children.

Milestones for language development

Before the child learns how to talk, they are already capable of communicating through vocalizations, gestures and facial expressions. At one year old, children start to comprehend and use simple vocabularies. After two years old, they start producing phrases with two elements, for example, 'Play ball' and 'Mommy eats'. They also start to comprehend and follow longer commands, for example, 'Put the apple in the bowl'. At three to four years old, children possess the skills to form a more detailed narrative and use complex sentences. They could also respond to and ask a series of questions.

Creating a language-rich environment

Parents should avoid giving excessive care to their children in everyday life. Instead, parents can let them express their needs. At babbling stage, children express themselves in non-verbal means such as body movement, gesture and facial expression. Parents can respond to their attempts in gentle tone with a warm smile. For example, parents can say 'that's yummy', 'yes, it's a bread' or 'big hug'. Description of an object should remain consistent for all family members. For example, when referring to feed the dog, every family member should use the same word. It is unfavorable for one to say 'feed the dog' and the other to say 'feed wowo' or 'feed doggie'. Exposure to simple and repetitive words can facilitate children's language comprehension and expression.



When children start to use simple words, parents can acknowledge their attempts appreciatively with nodding and smiling. Meanwhile, when talking to children, parents can wait patiently for their response before expanding on it. For example, when a child says 'water', parents can respond with 'Yes, drink water!' Parents can also use daily routine to foster communication. When taking care of children, parents can talk to them in simple language. This would help them to map the words they hear onto what is happening in their surroundings and enhance their understanding of language in context.

When children start to use sentences, parents can patiently listen to their children, and respond by expanding the children's sentences. Parents can enhance the complexity and vocabularies of children's productions by adding adjectives, description about location or people, or even connectives. For example, when a child says 'I want to play toy car', parents can respond with 'You want to play with the big, red car', 'You want to play car on the floor with your brother' or 'You can play toy car because you have finished your homework'. Furthermore, parents can ask the child some 'what if' and 'why' questions in daily life to foster problem-solving and inferencing skills. For example, 'what would you do if daddy lost his wallet?' or 'why do we need to wash our hands before eating?' Parents can also share with their children about their day, and encourage children to narrate about their daily experiences at school.

When talking to children, parents need to gain their attention by calling their names, keeping eye contact and staying in face-to-face position. This enhances their communicative intent and makes sure that they are on the same page with you.

Activities fostering language development

These are activities that children can do in daily life. Parents can easily make use of these activities to develop their language and communication skills:

1. Grocery shopping (parents can say: object name, object function, whom it is for, the reason for buying or the classifiers and amount of items)
2. Snack making (parents can say: food name, taste, flavor, cooking for whom or the sequence of the procedure)



3. Handcrafting (parents can say: tool name, theme of the handicraft, describe the steps in making it or describe the features of materials)
4. Book reading (parents can say: name of the characters and their features, ask comprehension questions, ask the child to retell the story, predict what will happen later or deduce the characters' feelings)
5. Playing board games (parents can say: rules of the game, problem-solving, announce results)

The above activities are closely related to children's daily life. Children can learn the procedure of these activities through playing (e.g. In making sandwich, first put a slice of bread on a plate, then spread butter on it and finally put some condiments). Children can play different roles in these activities and develop communication skills accordingly. Parents can actively participate in the process so that children can enjoy learning and playing with them.

Parents should limit screen time of their children and replace it with activities such as reading books or playing games together. By doing so, children have more chances to practice language usage in the real world and learn communication skills through interaction.

Games and Toys

Through playing games and toys, children's ability improves in all aspects, including social skills, attention, language skills, physical capability and cognitive ability. Parents can choose suitable games and toys for children based on their interest and ability.

For pre-verbal children, parents can engage their children with blowing bubbles, playing peek-a-boo and singing nursery rhymes, so that children can develop communication skills and preverbal skills, for example joint attention, turn-taking and eye contact, through interaction with others.

For children who begin to use words, parents can play cooking sets and building blocks with them. Various sentence structures and vocabularies can be learnt. For example, 'Put the potato in the oven' or 'Give mommy the roast chicken'.



For children who have started kindergarten, parents can read books, enjoy role-playing games and even card games with them. Children can learn to use complex sentences, inferring and problem-solving skills.

Parents have to be fully engaged in the playing process and follow the children's lead. Parents can also bring in appropriate topics and new ways to play so that children can always enjoy interacting with them, hence having more fun together for a longer time.

References and further reading:

1. Learning Language and Loving it: A Guide to Promoting Children's Social and Language Development in Early Childhood Settings. Weitzman, E., The Hanen Centre 1992.
2. It Takes Two to Talk: A Practical Guide for Parents of Children with Language Delays. Pepper, J., Weitzman, E., The Hanen Centre 2017.



Child Assessment Service, Department of Health
Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Government

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