

Article for Parent Partnership Newsletter

Talk and Learning:

Speaking, listening and language

We all need language to speak and to listen effectively. Good language users identify and sequence sounds in words and pronounce words clearly. They combine thousands of words into different types of sentences, using correct grammar, for example, statements, instructions or questions.

Language and learning

Words describe what we do, and how we think. Language also helps us to acquire concepts of our environment. If you list all of the words that relate to your own home, work and immediate community, your list would seem endless.

More immediate concepts also help us to understand those that are more obscure. Consider the word 'moon'. Amongst other things you know that the moon is many miles away, without life and linked to the variations of weather and seasons, as is the sun. But we could not know this without language. A picture alone does not allow us to form a complete concept of the moon or the sun.

Now imagine touching a hot oven. If you burn yourself you would not need words to tell you not to touch it again. Your sense of touch would be enough. But few people have experienced the moon and the sun, so we need simpler concepts to give us an idea of what they are like.

Without language to describe what we see, feel, hear, touch and smell, and without words that extend understanding beyond immediate sensory experience, our knowledge of the world would be severely limited.

Use of language as communication

So, we have the words and we know how to put them together. But effective language users also communicate. They listen to others and respond appropriately. They think carefully and choose the best words to fit a social situation, and to get their precise meanings understood by others.

Communication has much to do with social skills – taking turns in a group and not interrupting people until they have finished speaking. Many children have acquired a rich and extensive vocabulary, and know how to combine words into longer sentences but their communication skills still need to be developed.

It is also a sad fact that in our technological world more and more children are becoming better able to communicate with machines than with people. As schools try to keep up with every subject on the curriculum there is often less time for children to engage in quality speaking and listening. As a result, talk may be neglected in the very place where it is most needed – the classroom. As many children with learning difficulties also have either a delay or a disorder in the area of communication, it is time to give speaking and listening its rightful place - at the heart of learning.

Remember also that reading and writing are forms of communication. If your child does not learn to communicate through talk, he will struggle to communicate through writing.

Helping at home

Pre-nursery

Talk about everything you and your child do together – visiting the doctor or dentist, shopping or feeding the ducks. At this early stage, talk will:

- Help your child to recognise different speech sounds
- Encourage him to imitate and reproduce those different speech sounds

- Introduce the role of talk - as a source of help, comfort and a means towards positive human interaction and good communication.

At this stage don't worry what to talk about – just talk naturally about whatever is going on in your home and local community, and as your child develops, try to move away from the 'baby talk' that he may have become used to. Also, from the beginning, read a range of stories to your child and make reading a warm, cosy experience between you.

Foundation stage

This should be the stage when your child starts to cue in to what learning is about.

Talk can help your child to:

- Explain his feelings about school and any concerns he may have
- Identify problems early enough for them to be addressed and resolved
- Start to develop positive ideas about what learning means – at this early stage talking about what goes on at school helps your child to become a good and motivated learner
- Develop confidence and independence
- Expand on and explore thoughts – adopt the 'what if?' approach (What if that lion got out of its cage?)

Continue to talk about everything you do together and try to link talk with what he is learning at the nursery or at school. When cooking, which ingredients are heavy or light? Which weighs more or less? Count the stairs on the way to bed. Count sweets, or pieces of cake. Talk simply about how things work in the home – the TV needs electricity so we have to plug it in. Describe things by colour, size and shape. Play the game 'I Spy' (I spy something that is a circle, red and has two hands – clock?)

Try to talk *with* your child and encourage him to make choices - what to wear for snow, rain, a hot day and so on. Tease out your child's opinions and try to develop his confidence to make safe, simple decisions.

At this stage, play and learning are inter-linked, and playing with others (in the sand, painting, role-play) is part of the learning process. Teach your child how to talk and play in a positive manner, and that in a world of very different opinions, and cultures, talk helps us to solve problems happily.

At Key Stage 1

Continue to talk about what you do together. Continue to focus on school and learning. Your child needs to start talking, in very simple terms, about his own learning - what he is good at and what he needs help with. Children need to feel good about themselves as learners. Talk can motivate your child, maintain good self-esteem and help to nip any early problems in the bud.

Given the speed of learning in KS1, mainly on reading, writing and numeracy, your child needs to fully understand the many new words and concepts that are introduced. In numeracy, many children struggle to understand words and phrases such as - more than or less than, double, halve or fraction. New words need to be talked about, at school and at home, if they are to facilitate further learning.

Key Stage 2

From Year 3 onwards the curriculum becomes far more complex. The many more new concepts that are introduced in science, geography, history and in other foundation subjects make it more important than ever for children to know when they do not understand and ask an adult for further explanation. If your child has come through KS1 as a self-motivated learner, with the confidence to express his own needs, he should have no difficulties, as he will have used language for different purposes and with different people to:

- Ask questions
- Explain how something works
- Describe an object, picture or event with growing accuracy and a range of vocabulary

- Give a personal opinion
- Debate or evaluate something
- Resolve problems with others.

When talking about learning or homework, remember always to reassure, praise, and identify what is good before mentioning something that may need to be improved.

At secondary school

For many children, secondary school may seem a large, frightening place when they first encounter it. Of course, having been there, we know that it isn't. As subjects become more separate, taught by many different teachers, and as reading, writing and maths may seem to take priority, opportunities for talk may be squeezed out.

Talk at home is as important now as it was at the start, but different. Your young person will be expected to read longer words and understand more abstract concepts. To help him do this, seek to develop his spoken vocabulary. Talk about what's going on, not just in your local community, but across the world. Encourage your young person to listen to the news and talk about national and international events. Use spoken language to evaluate the good and the bad of what's happening in our world today. All this talk will support his literacy and other learning.

Your young person will reach that difficult age when hormones kick in. He may not want to talk much – especially to adults, while he's struggling to come to terms with growing up. We can't force it, but opportunities for talk can still be there, ready to be taken up at the right moment – for praise, comfort, reassurance and support.

Throughout your child's schooling remember that a problem shared really *can* be a problem halved. Give your child that precious gift of language.

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