Visit any preschool classroom and the chances are great that you will find one or more children with challenges in oral language. As far back as 1972, Weiss & Duffy wrote, “Oral language disorders are one of the most prevalent handicapping conditions among preschool and school-age children.” That statement still holds true today.

Due to the understanding that children with and without disabilities will participate in center-based child care and preschool settings, early childhood teachers need to know how to support oral language development because it sets the foundations for later life achievement (Mustard, 2008; Reilly et al., 2015).

**Preschool children and language development**

As stated by Susan L. Massey, “Early childhood teachers have an important responsibility: to promote oral language development for the students in their classroom” (2013). For the purposes of this article, oral language is defined as one’s ability to comprehend the meaning of words, and appropriately apply semantic (meaning), syntactic (grammar), morphologic (structure), and pragmatic (sensible) rules to the words used when expressing ideas and feelings (Weiss & Duffy, 1979).

Additionally, oral language disorder is defined as an inability to comprehend the meaning of words, and appropriately apply these rules to the words used when expressing ideas and feelings (Weiss & Duffy).

The most common types of oral language developmental concerns are speech and language delays. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, they “occur with an estimated prevalence of 2% to 19% in young children and can signal the presence of other disorders” (Rosenberg & Tarshis, 2016).

Oral language is a developmental process in children that can be influenced by a variety of disabilities (Westlake, 1953). Unfortunately, many of these children continue to present speech and language delays well beyond prekindergarten. Despite their role in facilitating oral language development in young children, many early childhood teachers do not feel they have the necessary skills or knowledge to facilitate language development (Attrill, Marsh & Coles, 2017).

This perception or belief is unfortunate because a majority of young children receiving disability services in center-based child care and preschool inclusion settings have been identified as individuals with a specific communication disorder such as an expressive, receptive, pragmatic, syntactic, and/or semantic language impairment. Soaking preschool children in language baths can increase their language development (McCartney, 1984). That is why it so important that preschool teachers have the necessary tools to begin to intercede as early as possible.
How oral language deficits present in the classroom

Typically developing young children that enter early care and education settings are in the process of acquiring oral language skills; such skills are most often acquired during the first five years of life (Koralek, Dodge, & Pizzolongo 2004). Receptive (understood) language most often precedes expressive or spoken language in infants and toddlers. Long before they talk, they can understand what is being spoken. The innate impulse or urge to communicate is present in typically developing children during their first months of life. Sounds, waving arms, and facial expressions are ways that the youngest children begin to communicate, long before words are spoken.

By the time they enter preschool at age 3 or 4, most children are able to hold conversations with each other and adults, say and understand thousands of words, and are well on the way to reading and writing.

The following language/communication skills for children ages 3 to 5 are indicated by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2017):

At 3 years, most children can do the following:
- follow instructions with 2 or 3 steps,
- name most familiar things,
- understand words like in, on, and under,
- say first name, age, and sex,
- name a friend,
- say words like I, me, we, and you and some plurals (cars, dogs, cats),
- talk well enough for strangers to understand most of the time, and
- carry on a conversation using 2 to 3 sentences.

At 4 years most children can do the following:
- know basic rules of grammar, such as correctly using he and she,
- sing a song or say a poem from memory, such as “Itsy Bitsy Spider” or “Wheels on the Bus,”
- tell stories, and
- say first and last name.

At 5 years most children can do the following:
- speak clearly,
- tell a simple story using full sentences,
- use future tense, and
- say name and address.

But what if they can’t? As stated earlier, the skills indicated by the CDC refer to typically developing children. However, children with disabilities or developmental delays that impact their oral language development will present differently when compared to their same age peers.

Additionally, the differences will range in severity (Weiss & Duffy, 1979). For example, young children identified as having semantic language deficits, or deficits in the ability to understand word meaning, exhibit vocabulary deficits and will lack age-level concepts (Weiss & Duffy).

Other children (and adults) may have a hard time understanding children with speech delays, either expressive or receptive. Their vocabularies can be mildly to extremely limited (both expressive and receptive), or they may have a hard time communicating, making speech sounds, and understanding when others talk.

The importance of oral language development cannot be understated. As stated by Massey (2012), “Oral language competencies developed in the preschool years are related to reading competence when children transition to elementary school.”

Because literacy skills influence children’s livelihood from early childhood through adulthood, early childhood teachers need to understand and appreciate the importance of oral language development.

While understanding and appreciating the importance of oral language development is essential, knowing how to create a language-rich environment in which all children actively participate in classroom dialogue is more important.

10 ways to promote language and communication in preschoolers with delays

We know that children develop language and communication at all rates and tempos. While some are on a speedier developmental continuum, others are developing at a slower pace. The preschool teacher begins where each child is developmentally, and uses the same activities for children with language delays as she does for promoting or fostering language in typically developing children.

Preschool classrooms that are focused upon language acquisition and are bathed in language activities all day, every day can make an impact. Focusing intentionally on fostering language is key. Activities used when working with older toddlers can improve language development for all children with language delays.

The following strategies are best practices in any
preschool classroom and are readily available to you as a teacher. Intentional and consistent practice of these strategies will provide language development opportunities for children with delays and those without.

- Respond to non-verbal actions with language. “Do you need help putting those blocks in the bucket?” “I see that you placed the red crayon next to that yellow one.” Commentate, commentate, commentate (Hoff, 2006)!
- Bathe children in language. Mealtimes, naptimes, toileting, and transitions to outside and inside are wonderful opportunities to bathe preschoolers in language. “Look how we are going outside in a straight line that keeps us safe,” you might say. Familiar (and unfamiliar) rhymes and songs keep language flowing during transitions to and from activities or while changing environments, as well as before and after routines.
- Arrange the environment to promote language. Some children have delays because of a language-deficient environment. Spend time making meaningful conversations with children. Provide objects that are uncommon but good conversation starters, such as artifacts from vacations or trips outside the classroom. Use props and open-ended questions in dramatic play to spike curiosity and language interaction. “What would happen if we put our hats on and went to the store?” “Why do you think that baby doll is crying?” “How can we make a house with these blocks?”
- Give simple (one-step and two-step) instructions. “Put two markers in that box.” Now add a second step: “Put two markers in that box, and one marker in this box.” Reverse the activity by asking the child to give you a direction or step to perform. To extend communication, have the child add another step if possible (Piasta et al., 2012).
- Read, read, read to them! Begin with rhymes and songs and then add picture books such as Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See? that allow children to predict what will happen on the next page. Give them time to participate in the story reading by asking questions such as, “What do you think he will see next?” and “I wonder who will be sitting on that next page (before turning the page)?”
- Talk through or comment continuously on everyday events. These may include scheduled events such as routines, or activities going on in the classroom. You might say, “I saw you put the blue chair next to that red one,” for example. “When we line up today, let’s say hello to one other friend.” “Who set the table last? (Pause) So, now whose turn is it?”
- Make music. Use silly songs that rhyme, listen to music during transition or group time, and have sing-alongs. Play musical instruments such as ukuleles, guitars, keyboards, small drums, and triangles to enhance music time and foster language development. Invite children to sing along to songs, such as those by Ella Jenkins: “Did You Feed My Cow?” “You’ll Sing a Song,” and “Mayree Mack,” to name a few.
- Use unfamiliar and/or bigger words in context along with smaller words. Enhance vocabulary (expressive and receptive) by using unfamiliar words such as, “Has anyone see my whisk?” or “Did you see that enormous fly?” We can talk up rather than down to children as we use words in a meaningful way or in context (Hoff, 2006).
- Use signing. Just as signing is good for infants and toddlers in acquiring language, it can benefit preschoolers with language delays as well. Start with simple signs but speak the words along with signing. Use signing in context, with meaning to the child. Otherwise, it’s another practice of non-essential teaching or teaching for the sake of teaching.
- Remember that we cannot instruct children in language. Acquiring language, both receptive and expressive, is a developmental process. It’s also incremental—no amount of flash cards or drilling
is developmentally appropriate or best practice. Learning language must occur in context, with relevance or importance to the individual child. Talk with children about important things, and their language will develop as a matter of course.

**Further assistance in language development**

As you use these strategies daily in the classroom, know that sometimes children with language delays will need additional assistance. These strategies are not to replace prescribed language therapies but are to enhance and provide additional support for the children in care.

Work with parents and therapists to find out how you can provide the support needed in the classroom. Speech therapists have great resources for non-therapy environments such as classrooms and can give you additional tools to work with children.

**References**


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