

Why parents should build up their child's language skills

Any child benefits from encouragement to develop his language skills, as language is the basic tool for learning. However, this particularly helps a child who stammers as the better his language skills the more likely he is to manage his stammering.

We know that one of the reasons that girls tend to recover from stammering more than boys at the pre-school stage is that they usually have better developed language skills. At the very least, good language skills will help your child to be more confident about his abilities and raise his self-esteem. He will make more progress academically and socially if he has the confidence to express his ideas, even when stammering.

As we know that talking is an essential building block in the learning of language it is possible that children who stammer, even if they are comfortable with their stammering speech, do not get the reinforcement of their language skills by talking to the same extent as the child who does not stammer. This is because the stammer may lead to the avoidance of talking so the child has less practice with learning new words and pronouncing them correctly. Sometimes struggling to speak may prevent the child from hearing and monitoring his own speech and remembering words as he talks. Therefore it is very helpful for a child who stammers if parents can systematically help him to build up his language skills.

Parents should take steps to help their child to build up his language skills.

Building up vocabulary for the younger child

Extend his vocabulary and encourage him to learn new words

Children do not learn language just by hearing it around them. They have to communicate and interact for that to happen. The idea is to keep your child interested in words and talking so speak in the same sort of sentences your child does - keep them short and simple for the younger age group particularly but sometimes speak in sentences slightly longer than his to help **build up his vocabulary**. For instance, if he looks at a picture and says 'that's a car,' you could repeat his word and add an adjective such as red. When he is used to that you could introduce a word for size, such as big or small and gently introduce him to noticing details about what he sees. 'That is a big red car with four doors.'

Once he is really observing a picture, or an outdoor scene, you can ask him to tell you the exact details of what he sees and/or hears, encouraging him to use words that are very accurate. Concentrating in this fashion and talking about his observations is a very useful pre-reading skill as he is actually decoding the picture in the same way that reading requires the decoding of letters and symbols. Additionally, if he is able to concentrate and focus on this sort of a task he will be lowering the demands on his speech and feel more relaxed, so his stammering may be less severe in that situation. This will build his confidence in talking.

As your child develops more vocabulary and is starting to read independently encourage him to notice how words are used, to explore different ways of describing what is happening in a story, and to comment on the behavior and attitude of the characters.

Use words to explain activities and situations

In the Early Years of primary school, he will be quite receptive to your involvement, so if you are busy on a task, talk to him about what you are doing. This chatting encourages the child to think about what he sees and to make comments himself. Messages about language use, prepositions for example, may be conveyed as objects are picked up, described and put away in cupboards, on tables etc. You can also notice sounds made by everyday activities like pans simmering, a hammer on metal, and the difference between loud and quiet sounds heard.

He is hearing language then as you work and will be absorbing the message that words can tell you interesting things that you want to know. He may copy the idea, perhaps by explaining what he is doing to another person or even a toy if he is quite young as he plays. Play word games and encourage older family members to join in and show how interesting words are so that his curiosity to learn them is provided for.

Language development for the older child

As he gets older, go out of your way to involve him in discussions between family members on topics in which he will have an interest, such as which DVD to rent, where to visit or go on holiday. If he feels that he can put forward a point of view, be listened to and influence a family decision, he is more likely to grow up to appreciate just how powerful words are in their effects, and to want to learn them. If you do this, while he is at the age where he is likely to be responsive, then when he reaches adolescence, and is less likely to be co-operative, a lot of progress will already have been achieved.

Everyday language

If your child has a therapist he will be getting considerable help with strategies for everyday speaking as therapists really appreciate how upsetting it can be if a child is unable to communicate a simple request, such as buying sweets. Parents can support this by giving him opportunities to experience these situations and encouraging him to speak when he feels that he wants to.

Creating a rich language environment in the home to extend language skills

These everyday or functional language skills, as they are called, will be supported and supplemented by his schoolwork, where teachers will be developing these basic language skills and also extending his vocabulary and understanding of language in all its forms. He will be taught to increase his understanding of more complex language as used creatively, in discussions and in presenting an argument for example.

Parents can best help their child to extend his language skills by providing a diet of varied language at home that goes beyond the everyday and functional. They should read with their child regularly so he enjoys sounds, words and stories. Acting as a favourite character in a story helps the child to understand the signals behind language. A cross voice for a fierce story character, and a meek tone for a quieter character, can convey quite sophisticated messages about tone of voice and the variations of mood possible. This will help understanding of social language and therefore interaction with other children and adults. This particularly helps a child who stammers who may be concentrating so much on his own speaking that he needs help with picking up social signals of mood and tone in conversation.

Reading poetry, constructing rhymes and playing word games are all good means of developing an interest in language and its pleasures. Even if your child continues to stammer he will be very much helped by good language skills that give him the confidence to understand what he hears and to plan his own responses. When he comes across a new word encourage him to understand its meaning and pronounce and spell it correctly in a way that seems like a game.

Modelling an interest in language

'Standards are caught and not taught' so the parent who is seen regularly reading and talking within the family is passing on the message to a child that words matter and are enjoyable. Children who stammer, who may be finding it difficult at times to express themselves, are encouraged to speak when they see how interesting and valued words can be. They are more likely to develop the confidence to express their views, even when stammering.

Listening to your child

An important part is also played by listening in language development: we know that many adults including teachers have a tendency to dominate the conversation when talking with a child and to ask too many questions too quickly. Sensible pausing by the adult who is talking, the breaking down of longer sentences into simpler ones, giving opportunities for the child to just sit quietly and think before talking, will all help the quality of language used. The child should be encouraged to use words as he chooses, perhaps playing with rhymes and sounds and even inventing new words and phrases of his own.

When your child talks too much

Equally a child who stammers may be so anxious to have his say when he knows that he is able to express himself that he may interrupt other people's talking, and fail to listen to what is being said. Parents should listen without interrupting until their child has finished. Calmly it should be explained that his comments were very interesting, but in the same way that he was listened to he should try to listen to other people and not interrupt.

Interacting with your child

In primary school he will be expected to listen to advice, information and instructions and should have a foundation for this from his pre-school and home experiences. Practising these skills at home so that he is able to understand what is required, and take any action necessary, is helpful to his progress at school.

Asking your child to do something

When you have to ask your child to do something, attract his attention and ensure he is concentrating. Look at him and break down into sections the actions you want him to carry out. This is called 'chunking' your talking. Pause between the 'chunks', always addressing the child by his name, looking in his direction so that he is encouraged to look at you. In general it is always best to expect your child to look at you when talking, so that you do not speak until you have his complete attention. This might mean saying something like this,

'John, please stop playing with your Wii now.' (Pause for 30 seconds at least) Then comment supportively, 'That's a good boy.'

Follow up with another simple instruction.

'Put it all away now please, John.' (Pause while he does that, offering ideas on how to do that if he is having difficulties, then complimenting him when it is completed)

'Please come here now John, so we can talk about what we do next.'

As he gets older, it is still a good idea to follow the basic principles of this approach, modifying your language as necessary to suit his age.

If you always use this method when you give instructions to your child, you will be giving him time to concentrate on what he is doing. This capacity to concentrate is a very useful skill. Also, focussing on a task lowers the demands on his thinking, as he is clear about what he has to do. If he wants to reply in any way, as the demands on him are lowered, he will be more likely to be able to calmly reply and may be more fluent when he does so. It might also help with having your instructions carried out without the 'playing-up' that can occur at critical periods such as bed-times.

Questions and Answers

It may help to pause for one second before you answer him or ask a question. This slow, less hurried way of speaking gives your child time before answering.

Ask questions that require a yes or no answer if he is stammering severely.

Go on to more open questions if he seems ready to talk, not questions with simple yes or no answers. More open questions will help him to develop his vocabulary. 'What do you think Dad would like to do on his birthday?'

If you are busy doing something when he asks a question and cannot stop, tell your child that, although you are busy, you are still listening, or explain why you cannot stop, but will give him your full attention later.

Helping your child with reading and other media

Reading aloud with your child

The teacher and other key adults in school or at home are likely to hear pupils read aloud regularly, as they progress through the reading programme. Most schools encourage parents to read at home with their child for pleasure and to support the structured school reading programme. When you read with your child and he stammers, without perceived struggle or anxiety, you should listen attentively and comment supportively when he pauses. However, for a child whose reading needs to be heard, and is apparently struggling with his speech and showing anxiety, a paired reading strategy can be helpful for a parent to use.

Paired reading strategies to try

One method that has been reported as successfully encouraging the child who stammers is for the parent or other adult and the child to read aloud together in chorus. The rhythm of the adult's voice will give support to the child who stammers and he is most likely to keep up with that and enjoy the experience of talking fluently. When he feels ready to read aloud on his own, he should tap with a pencil and the adult stops reading, allowing the child to continue solo reading. As the child knows that he only has to tap again for the adult to join in with him, he may feel more confident and relaxed about talking; this could possibly improve his fluency in that reading task, although there is no certainty of that. Empowering the child in this way does seem to build confidence and make reading aloud sessions more enjoyable.

A further extension of the approach is for the adult to make the choice of who reads solo by tapping with the pencil so that the child has to be alert to the request to read, and cope with the kind of unexpected demand in a situation in which he should feel safe and supported. This experience may build confidence and allow the child to feel capable of responding without embarrassment when unexpectedly required to speak. You can use also story tapes for him to listen to so he hears experts reading aloud and encourage him to read along with them as he gets older. He probably will not stammer when reading with the tape and this will build his confidence.

Television

Try to monitor how much time your child spends in passive activities using the new technologies and make sure that he is not spending too much time on his own in his room with his computer or television. All older children nowadays are likely to have online friends on social networking sites and children who stammer who feel concerned about talking may find it particularly reassuring. However it does need to be monitored by parents as occasionally usage can get out of hand, be a substitute for real friends and at its worse lead to contact with inappropriate people. He is bound to watch this on his own sometimes as parents are busy people, but do make sure that the programmes are appropriate for his age and whenever you can sit down and watch the programme with him. Encourage him to make comments about the characters and the story and use the opportunity to build up his language by sharing ideas with him.

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