

Boost Children's Speech and Language Development with Books

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“Peek-a-boo!” Blonde, feathery hair stood and swayed like a field of wheat on Ben’s tiny head as I read the words from his book. I hadn’t meant to say ‘peek’ so powerfully, but Ben’s saucer-sized eyes had been riveted to the large, lift-the-flap pictures. Though Ben was only four months old, he loved books. Ben and I read together a lot when he was little even though at that time I knew little about research linking book sharing to children’s speech, language and literacy development.

I hadn’t realized how reading simple text slowly and expressively could help babies isolate the sounds of language. Nor had I clearly understood that, by playfully pointing to and labelling pictures, I could encourage babies to imitate sounds even before they could talk. As a toddler and preschooler, Ben gravitated to stories with rhythm and rhyme, and was especially content if he could see my facial expressions as we read together.

Joanne Morrissey, parent support worker with Early Expressions Preschool Speech and Language, tells us that “In addition to being a great way to connect with your child, sharing books with your child is one of the most effective ways to teach them about sounds, how sounds make words and how words form sentences and stories.” According to Morrissey one in every ten children has a significant speech or language problem. Book sharing can be a powerful tool that helps children focus on either articulation or structure of language.

Books with rhyme and alliteration, such as “Silly Sally” by Audrey Wood, help children hear similarities and differences at the ending or beginning of words. Books such as “Barnyard Dance” by Sandra Boynton or “Hand, Hand Fingers Thumb” by Al Perkins help children hear rhythm and syllables in words.

Articulation of specific speech sounds develops as children mature. The first sounds infants make are vowel sounds, followed by vowels in combination with consonants such as m and b. It’s no surprise that ‘mama’ and ‘dada’ are often babies’ first words. Other speech sounds emerge much later. Four-year-olds can produce almost all speech sounds correctly, but r, th, ch, j are typically still difficult. Speech pathologists rely on books tremendously in their work with children who have either articulation or language processing challenges. They may share “Leo the Late Bloomer” by Kraus with children who need practice hearing and forming ‘l’ sounds or “Four Fur Feet” by Margaret Wise Brown for the children working on ‘f’ sounds.

Books such as “Brown Bear Brown Bear” by Bill Martin Jr. can be used to emphasize specific speech sounds, or to highlight how words (adjectives and nouns) are combined.

May is Speech and Hearing Month. Preschool Speech and Language programs across Ontario have a wealth of information about children’s speech and language development. If you have questions or concerns about your toddler’s or preschooler’s speech, language milestones, or are simply curious to know more, check out this website to contact your local Preschool Speech and Language Program: http://www.health.gov.on.ca/english/public/program/child/speech/speech_mn.html .