

Language and Play

Play is often called the “work of children”, and that statement holds true when it comes to language development. Play and language go hand-in-hand, so facilitating a child’s language skills means helping them play at the same time.

What are the Types of Play?

- Functional play
 - Begins before age 2
 - Children interact with objects and people around them
 - Examples: stacking blocks, pushing a toy car, throwing a ball
- Symbolic play
 - Begins around age 2
 - Children pretend that objects are something different
 - Examples: pretending a banana is a phone, pretending a stick is an airplane
- Dramatic/pretend play
 - Develops between the ages of 3-5
 - Children create dramatic scenarios in which they pretend to be someone else
 - Examples: preschool children playing “restaurant”, “house”, or “doctor”
- Structured game play
 - Develops and continues throughout school age
 - Children use logic and rule-following to play structured games
 - Examples: board games, card games, dodge ball

Why is Play Important for Language Development?

Play nurtures many aspects of children’s development, including cognitive skills, gross motor and fine motor skills, social-emotional development, and communication. Some ways that play encourages language include the following:

- Encouraging the child to watch adults and other children.
 - Watching others’ mouths as they speak, paying attention to gestures and directions.
- Helping the child explore his or her world by watching and imitating others.
 - Learning positional concepts by watching an adult demonstrate them with a farm (e.g., “pigs are IN the pen”, “farmer is ON the horse”).
- Teaching the child to sequence steps in an action, and to tell stories with a beginning, middle, and end.

- Pretending to shop for groceries and performing each step of the sequence in order (making a grocery list, going to the store, picking out items, and checking out).
- Retelling what they did during play to others.
- Encouraging the child to formulate language and then use it for a reason
 - Narrating actions during solitary play to practice talking about what is happening, what will happen, or what happened in the past.
 - Directing others during pretend play (“you be the baby and I’ll be the mom!”).
- Teaching social language skills
 - Inviting peers to play and joining in others’ play.
 - Problem-solving and negotiating with others during structured and unstructured games.
 - Taking on the role of different people during pretend play.
 - Taking turns with others.

How Do We Help Facilitate Play and Language Development?

- Making a play plan and retelling play
 - Encourages sequencing: planning out what WILL happen, completing the plan, and talking about what already DID happen.
- Commenting on our own actions and the child’s actions
 - Example: when playing with Play-Doh, the adult says “I am rolling” or “You are cutting” to help the child learn sentence structure, commenting, and action words.
- Expanding on and extending the child’s utterances
 - Example: when the child says, “Block!”, adult responds, “Yes, a red block! Stack the blocks up high!”
- Adding 1-2 steps on to a child’s play sequence
 - Example: if the child is pushing a train around a track, we might create a “problem” with a train crash. This helps keep the child’s attention, build language, and encourages problem-solving skills.
- Using open-ended toys and materials
 - Example: we might set up a station to care for a baby doll with no real instructions on how to play or what the child might do first. This introduces the child to many new vocabulary words, concepts, and storytelling schemes!
- Asking good questions
 - Showing interest or creating anticipation: What next? What if? What now?

- Extending the child's thinking: How does it work? What's happening? What will happen next?
- Allowing the child to make choices/decisions: Do you want ____ or ____?
- Interpreting the child's curiosity: Who? What? Why? How?

References

"100 Days of Play" by Playing with Words 365:

<http://www.playingwithwords365.com/2013/06/the-importance-of-play-for-speech-and-language-development/>

"Welcome to Kid Confidential: Let's Play!" by Maria Del Duca:

<http://blog.asha.org/2013/02/14/welcome-to-kid-confidential/>