



## The Reading Room: Tips and Tricks

### The Importance of Oral Language in Children's Literacy Development

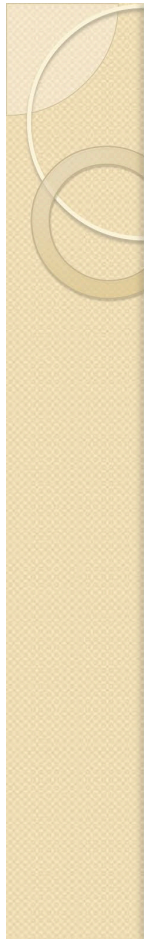
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Children's use of language forms the basis for learning how to read. That means literacy instruction for young children must incorporate their use of spoken language in every aspect of their development. It is their oral language that supports them as they attempt to become good readers. Due to the crucial role that oral language plays in a young child's literacy development, it is of the utmost importance that adults who work with young children support the growth of a child's spoken language beginning in infancy.

In this month's Reading Room, we will be discussing the importance of activities that support oral language development in young children, which provide them with a foundation upon which they build literacy skills. When we provide quality interactions with the young children, including conversations and play, language development will be strengthened, resulting in a greater foundation for literacy learning.

The foundation of oral language is crucial for young students, and most children entering kindergarten already possess somewhat of an understanding of language patterns. Therefore, we as educators must recognize that the development of oral language skills lays the groundwork for early literacy. The process of learning to read requires children to utilize their visual perception of printed text in conjunction with their knowledge of semantics and syntax in both spoken and written language (Clay, 2015, p. 95). As students begin to analyze the relationship between written symbols and the structure of their oral language, they acquire essential skills. Children's knowledge of language is subconscious and intuitive, allowing them to become masters of language usage. For example, they can grasp pragmatic knowledge and concepts such as subject-verb agreement, tense usage, the importance of meaning, without explicit instruction. The ability to master oral language when they enter kindergarten is essential for students' learning. Their ability to hear, read, speak, and write depends on their understanding of the relationships between expression and meaning.

Children use their language structures as a foundation for learning how to read. Therefore, literacy learning must incorporate the child's use of oral language. As they encounter more sophisticated textual patterns, children begin to recognize the differences between the way they "use words" and the way that books "use words". This is when they begin to learn that textual or "book" language can differ from their spoken language. Clay (2015a) states that if the literary language encountered in text varies significantly from the child's familiar language patterns, the process of learning to read may become difficult. That is why it is important that children learn to "talk like a book" (p.79). This is evidenced when a child who is not yet reading conventionally sits with an open book and "reads" the story incorporating phrases of literary language found in text, such as "Once upon a time".



## Dennis the Menace



"ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A GIRL CALLED SNOW WHITE AND SOME DWARFS NAMED SNEEZY, DOC, BLITZEN, BAMBI, PETER PAN AND PINOCCHIO..."

It is essential for adults to engage in conversation with young children, rather than simply talking to them. The difference between these two approaches is significant. Speaking to a child only requires them to listen, which is known as receptive language. This is a passive activity where the brain does not have to initiate any action before receiving the message. Speaking with a child, however, allows them to develop expressive language, as they mentally formulate ideas and then produce language to communicate those thoughts orally. This process of fine-tuning their language using precise vocabulary helps the child more accurately articulate the message they wish to convey.

Over time, this type of interaction with adults helps the child generate more complex oral speech patterns and this allows them to convey more information with others. This supports learning to read because a child who can orally produce sentences with adjectives, descriptive phrases, and other complex structures is better equipped to anticipate, predict, and produce similar patterns when encountered in literacy activities.

Because of the crucial role that oral language plays in a young child's literacy development, it is very important that adults who work with young children support the growth of the child's spoken language from the very beginning. There are several activities that can support the oral language development in young children, providing them with a strong linguistic

foundation. Through quality interactions and play, their language development will be strengthened, resulting in a greater foundation for literacy learning.

Research shows that early childhood oral language development can significantly impact a child's ability to learn language and develop literacy skills. Adults can support this development through conversation and the use of various types of toys, including pretend play, sensory play, and technological toys and apps. By recognizing the importance of oral language development and incorporating these strategies, adults can help pave the way for a child's successful literacy learning.

- **Listening to Stories Read Aloud**

Reading aloud to children serves many of the same purposes as engaging them in conversation. Becoming immersed in a captivating story can be a soothing and comforting experience for a child. Additionally, the child learns to view reading as a pleasurable activity, all the while it builds background knowledge, expands their vocabulary as new words are integrated, and exposes them to the rhythm and expression of fluent reading.

- **Dramatization of Stories**

Young children enjoy acting out stories they have heard. After listening to stories read aloud, children can use props such as puppets and story board pictures to retell the story. This allows children to become absorbed in the activity, reducing self-consciousness about their language production.

- **Wordless Books**

Wordless books, which tell stories through pictures alone or with minimal text, encourage oral storytelling. This allows for diverse interpretations, as no two readers would create the same story.

- **Toys and Oral Language Development**

Toys can promote the growth of oral language skills, which are precursors to literacy skills. Sensory play toys engage children's physical development, prompting them to use their senses to interact with the toys. This can lead to the use of comparative and descriptive language, as well as the development of directional prepositions. Technological toys and apps often focus more directly on cognitive-linguistic development through the practice of using sounds, letters, words, phrases, and sentences. While typically less multi-sensory or socially collaborative than other toy types, they can provide valuable data on a child's developmental progress over time.

## **Resources**

The Importance of Oral Language Development in Young Literacy Learners: Children Need to Be Seen and Heard by J. Reed and E. Lee

Becoming literate: The constructs of Inner Control by M. Clay

For questions, please contact:

Chris Fox - [cfox@ces.org](mailto:cfox@ces.org), Jessica Powell - [jpowell@ces.org](mailto:jpowell@ces.org)