

Helping Children Build Language Skills

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LEARNING BENEFITS

Vocabulary

Listening and Speaking

Preschool: That Sounds Silly!

Four-year-old Adam runs to his teacher and says, "I see the sky with my eyes! What color is the sky?" She responds, "What color do you think the sky is, Adam?" "Blue, blue-blue, blue, blue!" Adam replies in a singsong way. "Yes, Adam, the sky is blue," answers the teacher. Adam looks up at her and asks, "Why is the sky blue?"

Preschoolers love to play with words. They talk continuously both to themselves and to others, keeping conversations going by asking endless questions that may be hard to answer such as Adam's question, "Why is the sky blue?" Conversing helps them learn to listen and speak. And while 3-year-olds may still speak only in three- or four-word sentences, they use rules of language naturally.

Making Sense of the World

Like adults, preschoolers use words to understand the world around them. They also use props to act out adult roles. As she helps her dad wash the car, 4-year-old Roberta learns to associate a cluster of new words — sponge, bucket, scrub, squeegee—with a specific activity. Later, she practices and shares her new vocabulary as she and her friends wash their trikes. Using a closet with a sliding door as an elevator, Eli and Jon announce, "We're going up. Now we're stuck!" In a different game, a model ambulance and stethoscope inspire exciting dialogue as children rush an injured dog to the vet. Preschoolers are also beginning to understand that some words sound the same but have different meanings, as in "Come here" and "I can't hear you."

The Fun of Wordplay

At this age, children are discovering that words can gain them attention and make others laugh. They love funny, rhyming nonsense words. Charlotte squeezes the play dough and squeals, "Gush, mush, smush!" Threes and fours enjoy hearing nursery rhymes and often add their own silly extensions. After Robin recites, "Hey diddle diddle, the cat

and the fiddle," Jake retorts, "You are a diddle diddle head!" Preschoolers also enjoy alliteration and tongue twisters, and they like to sing repetitive lyrics, such as those in "The Wheels on the Bus Go Round and Round".

What You Can Do

- **Make prop boxes.** Store familiar items in separate see-through containers to encourage independent conversation and play. For instance, a tiny blanket, empty baby shampoo bottle, and diaper can go into a "baby box."
- **Follow children's lead.** Observe literacy themes that develop during play. If preschoolers are playing restaurant, offer materials such as menus, order pads, and pencils, and introduce related vocabulary words such as appetizer, beverage, and entree.
- **Encourage conversation.** Have regular storytelling sessions. Ask thought-provoking questions such as, "What would you do if you saw a giant beanstalk growing up, up, up in your backyard?"
- Most of all, be sure to allow children plenty of time to enjoy playing with words in a pressure-free, supportive, and print-rich environment.

Kindergarten: Say It Loud — Say It Clear

"You have to organize the cars like this!" shouts 6-year-old Steven as he tries to coerce his classmate, Marcus, to play his way in the block area. "Me want them here," Marcus softly replies.

If you haven't already, take the time to step back and listen to how children communicate. You probably will notice that each child uses a vast range of communication styles. On one hand, kindergartners want to be "big" and to express themselves like adults. On the other, they don't want to lose the security of being "little," so they continue to use some baby talk.

It's hard to tell how much of this inconsistent communication reflects children's still-developing language skills and how much is due to their stage of social/emotional development. That's probably because these two domains work together. How children feel about themselves, how they play with others, and how independent they are all affect the style and content of their communication.

Am I Big or Little?

Kindergartners are eager to show off their knowledge, strength, and independence by talking in ways they consider grownup. They enjoy demonstrating new vocabulary, often issuing strong statements of beliefs, reciting a variety of interesting facts, or even experimenting with profanity.

Kindergartners tend to be self-assured and literal. Try questioning their ideas and you'll quickly see how stubborn they can be as well! Remember that in their minds, being grownup is closely linked to being right.

However, their fear of growing up is often as strong as their desire to be grownup already. So their need to sound young is also socially and emotionally based. Kindergarten is a year of major transitions. Children move away from their familiar home or preschool into a school situation that can feel crowded and confusing. It's not unusual for them to regress in their speed of language learning and behavior. Sometimes it's just easier to sound and act little in order to get attention or nurturing.

Tuning In

As adults, we know when and with whom to use certain phrases and words — and when and with whom not to. This high level communication skill begins forming during kindergarten. Kindergartners are increasingly able to "read" others, especially adults. They are becoming more and more aware of when it's useful to appear "big" and when it's helpful to be "little." While this behavior may seem calculating, it's actually an important communication strategy that we all use. Of course, some fine-tuning will be needed, but what's important is that children are experimenting with how their language can affect others.

What You Can Do

- **Provide consistent attention and support.** Be sure to notice children when they're acting mature, not just when they're being babyish.
- **Focus on the positive.** For example, discourage whining by telling children that you want to hear what they're saying but will listen only when they use a normal voice. By ignoring the whining voice while supporting the regular one, you'll teach children more appropriate ways to gain others' attention.
- **Ask open-ended questions.** By doing so, you'll encourage children to express their ideas without having to worry about being right or wrong.
- **Listen carefully.** Offer thoughtful responses so that you validate children's language, as well as their ideas and feelings.
- **Be patient.** Remember that observation and compassion are your most important tools in the classroom. Instead of immediately reacting to children's immature behavior and ways of speaking, take a breath — then watch, listen, and feel where your children are emotionally, socially, and linguistically.

Along with many changes and missteps, the coming year will bring your children rich rewards. By supporting their burgeoning language skills, you'll ensure that you and they thoroughly experience the adventure that lies ahead.