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Speaking Out “After Your Child’s First Words...”

By Gloria Lazar

Along with a child’s first steps, the first spoken word surely ranks as one of the high points in a parent’s life. Whether it’s “car” as in the case of one of my sons, or “hi” for my other one, those first words, along with early phrases such as “car gone” or “I see” stay in a parent’s mind. For the first couple of years, every milestone achieved seems worthy of a phone call or email to family and close friends. These small acts of normal growth seem miraculous. And they are. Later, we take for granted the physical and intellectual feats that children exhibit on a regular basis, but those first words are truly spectacular. What happens after the first words?

Most children begin with a handful of spoken words in the first year to 18 months, then begin to string together words in short phrases. Sometime early in a child’s second year, short sentences start to pop out, especially when a child wants or needs something. By age three, the average youngster has a reasonable grasp of the basics of English grammar, speaking in sentences with a subject, verb and object, specifying color, size and other attributes with adjectives and adverbs. Usually this linguistic ability gains momentum, but not always. For some children, the gradual acquisition of spoken language does not take place smoothly or easily. Blessings we take for granted are not automatic for some, but become the result of hard work on both the parents’ and the child’s part.

How can parents help a child develop language? Are there simple things parents can do to help this process? As a speech-language pathologist, I am often asked these questions. My answer is, “yes.” Sing with your

child from early on, chant nursery rhymes and lullabies. Why are these so effective? For several reasons, beginning with the soothing nature of music. Just as birdsong appeals to the human ears, sung melody has a calming effect on babies and young children. The addition of words linked with these melodies feeds off the positive effect of song. Ever notice how much rhyming takes place in *Jack and Jill*, *Mary Had a Little Lamb*, and other seemingly simple nursery songs?

Research shows that the ability to rhyme is one of the most important factors in language development. Songs and games of wordplay are not simply “child’s play,” but critical activities in the development of a child’s ability to use language effectively. Helping your child to distinguish between the sounds of English, to pick out and create rhymes, can also be valuable in acquiring pre-reading skills. Most schools these days use phonics programs in some way to teach reading. Developing an “ear” for language not only will help your child learn to speak, but to become a fluent reader in future years.

Sing to your child. Read to your child. Foster an under-

standing and an appreciation for the melody of language, for the individual sounds of language as well as the overlapping ones that we find in rhymes. As your child matures, keep reading aloud. How many children have memorized the words to *Green Eggs and Ham* long before they can actually read them? I am often asked, “Is this okay? Is it cheating?” Absolutely not. Don’t expect your child to be able to translate the symbols on the page for the sounds and words they represent simply because you read aloud to him or her. Acquiring an ear for language, for word play, for remembering phrases and sentences is an important step in the development of language and reading skills.

All those Victorian lullabies and nursery rhymes are actually valuable, so don’t hesitate to use them, no matter how imperfect your singing might be. *Mary, Mary, quite contrary, how does your garden grow?* Not only by silver bells and cockle shells, but singing, ringing, springing words... and words... and words. ♦

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