

How can I support parents/caregivers in enhancing their child's speech?

Irena Blemings

Biography



Irena is an Early Childhood Educator who spent fourteen years as supervisor of a local daycare center. She is currently employed by the Children's Aid Society of Brant as a Child Development Worker. Irena has had a variety of experience working with children six years of age, and under, parents and caregivers and community partners. In collaboration with the Early Years Challenge Fund, Grand Erie District School Board, Kids Can Fly and the Children's Aid Society of Brant, she established the pilot Launch Pad at Bellview School in September 2003.

Launch Pad Programs

The Launch Pad is an early child development and parenting center located in a school. It is a free drop-in center for adults and caregivers and the children they care for who are 6 years and under. The center is available for any community member who wishes to participate in the program. The center offers support to parents in their every day struggles to raise children as well as provide links to the various community supports that are available to them. There is an onsite resource library where the use of the books and videos is free of charge. Monthly parenting workshops are held one evening per month, free of charge. The topics are determined by the needs of the community.

The center offers a variety of age appropriate activities for children and adults to participate in together. The children are given the opportunity to explore a variety of activities to enhance the skills that they will need to make a successful transition to Junior Kindergarten (JK).

"The first 3 years of life represent a critical period in the development of competence which will last a lifetime. By the time a child reaches school age most key brain wiring, language abilities, physical capabilities and cognitive foundations have been laid down." (Rima Shore, Rethinking the Brain 1997)

Background

On a daily basis I was seeing children come into the center who exhibited difficulty expressing them selves. Some of the children would become frustrated and scream when their needs were not understood by neither the adults nor their peers. The parents were often unsure whether their child's speech was age appropriate or not. I soon began to realize that there was a need to educate the adults in appropriate ways to stimulate their child's speech and encourage the use of words rather than reaction. I also realized the need to compile community resources to give to parents when they were ready to act on their concerns.

Case Study

Laura's initial visit at the Launch Pad was on May 18, 2004, at the age of eighteen months. She is an only child living with both parents. Her mother is her primary caregiver as she is a stay-at-home mother. The family recently moved to Brantford and does not have family that live in the city for support. Her father works out of town and they only have one vehicle so Laura and her mother attend activities within walking distance of their home. Her mother has discussed concerns with me and I have encouraged her to engage in conversations with other parents.

After observing Laura for a month, I became concerned about her lack of attempts to verbalize. She did not attempt any sounds and the only "noise" we heard were screams when she became frustrated. Laura exhibited a short attention span (not unusual for eighteen months old) and her mother consistently assisted Laura to return and tidy before going on to another activity. Her mother provided a good role model as she labeled and encouraged Laura to attempt sounds.

I discussed my concerns with Laura's mother and gave her a "Talking Tots" flyer. She called and was put on a waiting list for assessment. I did a follow-up call to the Ontario Early Years Centre and found a spot for June 2004 for a mini-assessment. This assessment confirmed my concerns and the full assessment was done in August 2004. The results of the assessment were:

Comprehension: 22-24 months

Expressive: 14-17 months

Laura's age at the time of assessment was twenty-two months. Her mother was given some suggestions by the speech professional to encourage Laura to attempt sounds. These strategies will be helpful because Laura will not begin the speech play group at Lansdowne Children's center until November 2004. By having the "mini" assessment done, we were able to start helping Laura four months earlier rather than waiting until November to begin intervention.

By October 2004, Laura's attention span had increased as she settled into routines at the center. She recognized the tidy song and appeared to enjoy circle time. During circle time, Laura participated by using hand movements and taking turns. She vocalized when she wanted something but it was not yet recognizable. By mid-October, Laura attempted "L" sound when asked her name. This is the first attempt at saying her name. In November 2004, Laura said her name clearly and more words were recognizable. Her mother reported that Laura's grandmother said she did not need to go to speech but her mother decided to take her anyway.



Laura attended the speech playgroup at Lansdowne Children's Centre one day per week from November 2004 until February 2005. In February she was reassessed and dismissed from the

group, as she is now age-appropriate in her skills. Lansdowne has offered a re-assessment in six months' time if her mother would like it and she is planning to have the assessment done to ensure that the progress is continuing.

“Parents are a child’s first teacher”.

Throughout the program I try to provide activities that will promote and stimulate the children to express themselves. The center is equipped with several learning centers that are a free choice for parents and children to access. The addition of props will often stimulate play and conversation.

In the picture below, Chelsea (two years old) interacts with the other children at the play dough table. The addition of the props from Mr. Potato Head to the play dough table encouraged language. We had been singing “Head and Shoulders” at circle time for the previous few weeks and while playing, Chelsea was singing the song. When wearing the glasses, she was repeating “eyes, ears, mouth and nose”. Her mother reported that she had been singing the song at home and her father asked, “When did she learn that?” Her mother replied “She learned it at the Launch Pad—she learns lots of things there!”



It is important as a classroom teacher to provide activities that can easily be duplicated at home by either the parent or the child. At the first of the year we did not have a puppet theatre or a specific area set up for puppet shows. I noticed that the children were using the back of the sofa to hide behind to do a show for their parents. Looking around, I found a piece of cardboard that would stand up to make a theatre and the four boys pictured below went to work producing a play for us. By providing the children with something as simple as a piece of cardboard, I was able to model for the parents a simple and inexpensive way to enhance their child’s play at home.

One of the four children (Cody) had limited speech at that time but felt comfortable within the setting and did sounds along with attempting some words. This child was subsequently assessed through Lansdowne Children’s Center and received speech therapy over a period of three months. Cody is now talking in full sentences and is able to talk to both adults and children comfortably. Prior to receiving the speech therapy, he would scream and cry when he wanted something. Cody is now much more social and is able to articulate his needs and will be much more ready to go to Kindergarten in September due to the intervention he received at an early age to help stimulate his speech development.



Some of the children have been attending the center since their birth. Jodie (mother) and big sister, Morgan began attending the center before the birth of Luke. They attend 2 or 3 days per week. From the time that Luke could crawl, he would go to the circle mats to get a mat as soon as I began to sing the tidy song and sit waiting for the rest of the children and adults. He would clap and imitate the motions of the songs and even before he could talk or walk, he would crawl to me and raise his hands so he could have a turn to play the game. The use of repetition and routine helps children internalize their skills and prepare themselves when language is ready to emerge.



“The program has helped to develop my children’s social skills, verbal skills and listening skills. Also, my children have learned respect and empathy for others. For myself, I have made connections with other mothers. I no longer feel alone when it comes to child development issues.” Jodie Flisak-February 10, 2005

Next Steps

I will try to continue to provide opportunities for the children and parents to practice their verbal skills. I feel it is important to model activities that can be duplicated at home and that parents realize that you do not need to spend a lot of money to provide your child with stimulating and fun activities. I encouraged the adults to use familiar, everyday objects when doing activities with their child. Routine and repetition is key to a child learning a concept so it is important for adults to offer the same objects in a variety of settings and uses. Such things as plastic measuring cups and spoons are valuable learning tools. They can be used in pre-math skills (making cookies), learning concepts (empty/full) and developing fine motor skills (scooping and stirring). The same tool used in a variety of ways encourages discussion and develops many skills—especially language development.

Conclusion

As I mentioned above, many of the strategies that I use to enhance language development are ones that can be duplicated by the adults in the children’s lives. They are inexpensive and use everyday items that are familiar to the children. When children are able to express themselves in a confident and clear manner, they are able to continue to improve their skills both socially and academically.

References

Hon. Margaret Norrie McCann and Fraser J. Mustard: Reversing The Brain Drain: Early Years Study Final Report April 1999

Personal Journal: Irena Blemings September 2003-June 2005