

Language and social-emotional development: the links, the S.E.T. steps and the strategies



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Normal speech and language development is a cornerstone for successful outcomes later in life. Language deficits beginning in early childhood can have a ripple effect throughout a child's life, which may directly or indirectly affect social opportunities, career options, and an individual's overall quality of life.

Many studies show that children with a history of early speech and/or language impairment are at greater risk for poor social-emotional adjustment, even at the toddler and preschool ages. Some studies have indicated that late talkers were more serious, more depressed/withdrawn, less interested in play and score lower on socialization tests. Children who have strong language skills are more likely to succeed at school with reading and writing, stay longer in school, are less likely to have attention deficits, psychosocial, behavioural or psychiatric issues than those who have early lags in speech and language delays.

Once again, this is a strong argument in favour of early intervention. Children may benefit most from an early intervention – at all levels. Early identification of language delay, involvement in early intervention programs available in the community, access to Speech Language treatment programs such as the First Words program in Ottawa, and community education must all be considered and accessed when we work with at-risk children. Get SET and go!

Get S.E.T.

Screening – the first part of Speech and Language intervention: It is the first step and the most crucial one! Be informed about key milestones: six months: eye contact, babbling by 10 months, first words by 12 months; 20 words by 18 months; 100 words and two-word combinations by 24 months. If you suspect your child has a speech and/or language deficit plan to attend a First Words community

screening clinics, held in different locations in Ottawa – they are free and you do not need an appointment. For more information visit www.firstwords.ca or look for a screening clinic calendar in community settings.

Early language intervention used daily can impact positively a child’s skills:

Recent research supports the efficacy of language-rich strategies. Research has shown using language-rich strategies that include positive interaction, modeling in social routines and daily activities, can improve children’s language competency in the preschool years and impact their later success. When support is provided by highly responsive adults to children in daily opportunities, children are getting the help they need to learn effective communication, appropriate social interaction, and positive behaviour.

Training for you – parent, community worker or childcare teacher: First Words is committed to provide widespread training to community workers and early years interventionists, parents, teachers and Early Childhood Educators. Training provides information on how to use responsive interaction styles and effective strategies to support and enrich the child’s language. However, this may not be sufficient to ensure optimal language outcomes; therefore, speech and language intervention is needed. Visit our website www.firstwords.ca for an update on our community focused training.

What are we to do when behaviour is linked to language delay?

1. Help them understand! Inappropriate behaviour may often be due to the child’s receptive language delays. We often presume that children understand everything that is said to them when in fact, they do not. Many of the behaviour and social skill problems that these students demonstrate can be linked to a lack of understanding. Children who do not understand language may not always behave in the way we would like them to. Here are a few strategies that may prove helpful:

- **Simplify your language:** Use short sentences, speak slowly, show and repeat often. Add a gesture, a picture or a visual cue.
- **Keep it short!** These children will need very clear directions and expectations for behaviour. Be specific and keep it short. Instead of “Please cooperate,” use words that describe exactly the expected behaviour and next steps: “Please, put on your shoe. Come here.”

- **Keep it consistent and predictable!** Children may be easily confused with changes in routines and may not pick up all the language cues announcing a change in the schedule or a transition. Expectations for behaviour need to be consistent and predictable. A daily routine that involves a familiar structure and strategies (i.e visual schedules can be helpful to announce change in routines) can make it easier for the child to function well.

2. Using words instead of fists! Social interaction and effective communication need a lot of shifting, of rapid turn-taking, of back-and-forth between many other speakers at the same time. This requires many attention, language and processing skills from children! For children with language delays, this may happen too fast for them to respond appropriately. Here are a few strategies to help children use words instead of inappropriate behaviour.

- **Words are important – let’s help children use them:** Encourage the child to use words to express his feelings and opinions and that will help him during play with other children. Words such as “no”, “it’s mine”, “no more”, “again”, “come”, “go”, “help me” and other more complex sentences such as “I need help.” “I’m not happy” will help the child express his ideas in verbal ways instead of physical ways. Explain new words that children may encounter.

- **Use visual strategies and cues:** Using visual strategies helps children and even adults – why is that? Because visual cues are constant, don’t fly away, are there for a long period of time and because children can go back to them when they need to. Visual cues improve both understanding and expressive communication.

- **Pretend play and social stories help children:** Promote pretend play and social stories (visit www.socialstories.com) with all children to help them learn how to respond to some situations. Practising words and appropriate behaviour in non-stressful situations may help them use those skills later in the day. Demonstrate the appropriate behaviour and repeat with the child. Practice does make perfect!

Finally, the link between language impairment and social-emotional development is well established in studies. However, there are steps and strategies that have proven their efficacy and that can influence positively the outcomes for children. Early identification and intervention, early language stimulation combined with parent, caregiver, teachers and early interventionists’ responsiveness can strongly influence the life of children! Language is the key!

References used in this article may be obtained by emailing firstwords@pqchc.com

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