

Books, Books, and More Books

It's that time of the year again when parents ask the question, "What can I do this summer to work on my child's speech and language skills?" I love this question, really I do. Parents vested in improving their child's language skills in the early years are helping their children build a stronger foundation for later academic success. Parents continue to be their child's best teachers even once their child attends school!

My answer to the, "What can I do this summer," question is to get out those picture books. If I could have only one tool in my therapy bag, it would be picture books. Now simply reading the books to your child is a wonderful start. There is so much research proving the positive effects of reading to your child for at least 20 minutes everyday. You absolutely will help your child's speech and language skills by reading to them or telling them stories. But wait, there's more! You can also take your book time to a new level and target specific skills and here are some ideas to do that.

SPEECH SOUNDS

- While you read, have your child listen for their speech sound.
- After every page or two, stop and find words with your child's target sound and practice saying the words a few times.
- Look for books that are loaded with your child's target sound. (Think Jack and the Beanstalk, "Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum," for the /f/ sound). Here are some more book ideas for specific sounds.

LANGUAGE SKILLS

- Does your child need to build their **vocabulary**? Look for books with the descriptive words at the level they need help (size words, color words, shapes). Or maybe they need to build their vocabulary of action words. Look for books with characters doing a variety of actions.
 - Learn new words. Authors often use words that you don't use in normal conversation. Stop and talk about what these new words mean. Sometimes, kids like to call these words, "fancy words," "sparkle words," or "special words."
 - Does your child need practice with **grammar**? If **pronouns** are one of your child's goals, look for books with frequent use of *he, she, they, his, her* (whatever pronouns your child needs practice using) or make up your own sentences about the pictures in the books to practice pronouns (He is _____, They are _____, His shoes are _____, Her hair is _____). You can use the same idea of practicing **verb tenses**. Look for books written in the "tense" that your child needs to practice (-ing verbs, third person present tense, like "walks, writes," past tense verbs).
 - **Answering questions**: Books are a great tool to practice responding to questions. Ask comprehension questions every page or two. Remember, that answering questions requires comprehension of both the question you're asking and the story that you've read. If your child is not answering questions correctly, try an easier book or an easier question. The typical hierarchy of questions from easy to hard follows.
1. **Yes/No questions**: For example, "Did he like the spinach?"
 2. **What questions**: For example, "What animal does she have?"
 3. **Where questions**: For example, "Where did the family go?"
 4. **Who questions**: For example, "Who was jumping on the bed?"
 5. **When questions**: For example, "When did he have to go to the doctor?"
 6. **Why questions**: For example, "Why did they have to clean their room?"

So you don't always feel that you're quizzing your child, you could try using, "I wonder" statements, such as, "I wonder where they are going," or, "I wonder why he's so sad." Your child doesn't have to answer, "I wonder," statements, but they usually do give an answer. Using, "I wonder" statements can make this activity feel more like a conversation than a quiz. When working on answering questions, be sure to listen for the right kind of answer, for example a place in response to a where question, a person in response to a who question...

- **Making Predictions**: Before turning the page, ask your child to predict what might happen next (e.g., "Who do you think they'll see? Where do you think they'll go? What do you think they'll find). When making predictions, there's no right or wrong answer, but again, listen for the right type of answer (e.g., a place in response to where questions, a reason in response to why questions).
- **Story Retelling**: In story retelling tasks, children exercise their comprehension skills, vocabulary, and grammar all in one. After reading a short story, have your child tell you the story. In preschool, an appropriate expectation would be to hear at least a few things about the story. A kindergartner's retell should have a beginning, middle, and an end. First graders are expected to include more of the important parts of a story in their retell (characters, setting, problem, solution). Try story retelling both with and without looking at pictures in the book. Some children need to be very familiar with a story, hearing it many times, before they want to try to tell the story.
- **Story Telling**: While browsing through the library, you may find some great wordless picture books. These books can be so much fun. You and your child can come up with words together to tell the story that the author told with pictures.

I hope you've gotten a few new ideas about using books to work on speech and language skills and I hope you have a great summer reading with your child!

Sincerely,
Tari Howland