12-2010

Eight Simple Rules for Talking with Preschoolers

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Recommended Citation

Paul, Rhea. "Eight Simple Rules for Talking with Preschoolers." *Teaching Young Children* 4.2 (Dec 2010/ Jan 2011): 13-15.

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Reading is a language-based skill. Good readers know the meanings of a lot of words. These words are learned as preschoolers talk with adults and listen to stories. A great deal of research shows that children who are aware of the sounds that make up words (phonological awareness) are likely to become better readers (Snow, Burns, & Griffin 1998). But to understand books and stories, readers need not only to sound out words *but also* to know what a lot of words mean.

It doesn't take special materials or curricula to help preschoolers build their vocabularies. Teachers can use the following "Eight Simple Rules" as often as possible during the day.

1 Stop, look, and listen to identify topics that interest children. Sometimes preschoolers are so involved in their work and play that it is hard for them to stop and listen to what adults say. Children won't learn much from the language we direct to them unless they pay attention to it. You can say, "I doff my hat to you," while you tip your hat to a child, but if the child isn't looking at you or paying attention to what you're doing, he won't learn what *doff* means.

That means a teacher needs to talk with children about what interests *them*. Take a moment to see what a child is doing, then talk about that.

As Maria builds a garage in the block corner, Ms. Yancey says, "Maria, tell me about your garage." This invites Maria to think about, and put into words, the ideas she is pursuing in her play. After Maria describes what she is building, Ms. Yancey follows up to introduce a few new words and model speaking in longer sentences. When Maria says, "It gonna be a big one!" Ms. Yancey can answer, "It *is* going to be big. It's going to be *huge*! There will be enough space to park lots of *vehicles*."

2 Talk, talk, talk to introduce new vocabulary and model language skills. Teachers can enhance children's language experience by accompanying all the routines and activities of the preschool day—in large groups, small groups, or one-on-one—with talk, talk, talk. At snack time, for example, describe what the children are doing: "Luke and Ana have set up the snack table. When you are ready, you can get some juice and make a lettuce roll-up. Theo is ready. He's putting hummus and cucumber in his roll-up. It looks delicious."

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Read-aloud times are another great opportunity for teachers and children to talk, talk, talk. While reading a story, stop to ask questions or make comments that help children remember what happened in the story, predict what might happen next, or recall a time that something similar happened to them. You might also share your reactions ("I liked the part when . . . " "I wish the bear had . . ."), then invite children to say what they liked, were surprised by, found silly, and so on. This encourages children to think and express their ideas in words.

3 Take turns to involve children in conversations. When talking with a child, it can be easy to fill the conversational silences, leaving little room for the child to join in. One way to avoid this is to consciously pass turns to the child so she can add to the conversation. To encourage the child to take a turn, ask a tag question—a little twist at the end of a sentence that invites the listener to respond. Some examples are

You like ice cream, don't you?
She didn't forget her lunch box, did she?
You can tie your shoes yourself, can't you?

Research shows that using these tags (Camarata & Nelson 2006) helps children learn how sentences work. Tags offer extra information about how sentences are put together and flip the conversational turn to children.

Asking open-ended questions such as "What do you think about it?" also encourages children to take a turn in the conversation. Questions that require only yes/no or one-word answers—like "Did you put your coat on the hook?" or "What color is this pen?"—invite only minimal responses. To stimulate language growth, ask open-ended questions, which invite children to offer lengthier and more detailed responses. Examples of open-ended questions include

How do you think this works?
Where do you think she could be hiding?

Open-ended questions are also especially good for talking about storybooks. They encourage children to recall their own experiences when they listen to the story, which deepens their comprehension.

4 Show *and* tell so children can learn by matching the words they hear to what they see around them. When introducing new words, match what you and the child are seeing and doing to what you are saying.

Maria and Malik decide to build a garage with unit blocks. Ms. Yancey sees the two children struggling to get the blocks to line up and fit the way they want them to. Instead of showing them how to do it, Ms. Yancey says, "You're working hard on building your garage. I see you are using *square* blocks—that's these right here—and *rectangular* blocks—that's these. How can you make the square blocks line up with the rectangular blocks?"

To show and tell, the teacher introduced a new word, *rectangular,* and demonstrated its meaning by matching the word to the block it corresponds to.

5 Talk about and play with sounds and words to help preschoolers build language skills. To support language play, join in and encourage preschoolers to have fun with words and sounds. You can also model sound and word play during daily activities. In dramatic play, for example, describe the store merchandise in silly ways, while modeling a pattern like, "I think you will like this *hatty* hat, and this *coaty* coat, and this *scarfy* scarf." Playing with language helps children learn to manipulate units within words and sentences. They will build on this skill when they learn to translate letters into sounds and combine sounds to form words as they begin to read.

Most of the time when we talk or listen to language, we look *through* words, like a window, directly to what they mean. But now and then, we can talk about the words themselves and, instead of looking through them, look *at* them. Preschoolers can learn to think of language as something to examine and think about. This awareness of the basic units of spoken and written language—words, sounds, letters, syllables, sentences—supports children when it is time to begin reading. For example, a teacher might introduce the book *Green Eggs and Ham* by saying, "We're

going to read a story today about Sam. There are some words in the story that Sam keeps saying over and over. Listen while I read, and see if you can tell me what words he keeps saying."

Here the teacher simply gives the children a name for the very obvious units—*green, eggs,* and *ham*—repeated throughout the story. She attaches the label "word" to something the children can easily identify, helping them realize, "Oh, those things are words!" Teachers can use similar strategies to help children learn to recognize other units, like sounds and syllables.

Discussions about words and sounds also occur during other activities. For example, if Ms. Yancey hears Pedro and Pat talking about the playdough, she might chime in, "I see you are rolling the playdough. You know, playdough starts with the same sound as both your names! Playdough, Pedro, Pat! It's the /p/ sound! Is there anything else in our room that starts with that sound?" The more preschoolers think and talk about sounds, words, letters, and sentences, the easier it will be for them to acquire the phonological awareness skills they need to learn to read.

6 Think out loud so children can learn how to use language to develop strategies and solve problems. Children learn by watching and listening to the important adults around them. But they can't see or hear our thinking. We need to describe it for them. To help children learn to solve problems with language, teachers can model thinking aloud and using language to guide thinking and action. For example, think out loud about the next event in a story. Share the information you use to predict what could happen next. This strategy lets children hear how to use language to address a variety of circumstances. Modeling your thinking will help children to acquire similar thinking skills that will assist in reading comprehension.

While reading a Curious George book aloud to the class, Mr. Trent says to the group, "Hmm, I wonder what surprise the Man in the Yellow Hat has for George. He said he was taking him to an animal show, so that can't be the surprise; a surprise is something you don't know yet. I see something wrapped up here in the picture. Maybe he got George a present! I think that's it—he has a present for George! Let's read and see what it is."

Of course, teachers should also ask questions that allow children to solve these problems themselves. But when children are still learning this skill or just need a reminder and model, you can think out loud to give children examples of more sophisticated ways to solve problems.

7 Make connections that help preschoolers go from here-and-now to imagine there-and-then. Young children build their vocabulary by making connections between what they hear people say and what is going on around them at the same time. But many preschoolers are ready to move beyond talking about the here-and-now. The ability to use language to talk (and read and write) about things outside of their direct experience is one of the crucial skills children need to succeed in school (Gleason & Bernstein-Ratner 2009) and to learn about things they may never directly encounter.

Teachers prepare preschoolers for this transition when they model talking about both here-and-now and there-and-then during everyday activities. Storybooks are a good place to start, because they are about events not happening in the here-and-now. Teachers can lead children in discussions that go beyond the story to talking about the past, future, or imagined events.

8 Use big words, over and over, because the more words children know, the better readers they will be. It's important to introduce preschoolers to big, less common words. Introduce new words in situations when the child is interested in what you're talking about. Then provide many repetitions, so the child can get a good idea of how a word sounds and what it means, then carve out a space for it in his memory.

Opportunities to use big words crop up throughout the day. For example, "That's a nice color you're using. It's kind of blue. I'd call it *turquoise.* Turquoise is a color, sort of like blue, but also sort of like green."

Conclusion

The oral language skills that children acquire in preschool can impact their readiness for learning to read and succeed in school. Although phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge are important, research on children's language development has shown that enriched language input and interaction can also have powerful effects. Using these "Eight Simple Rules" in daily classroom routines and activities will help preschoolers develop oral language skills.

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SUPPORTING DUAL LANGUAGE LEARNERS

Children who are dual language learners experience the world in a complex and varied way; some of what they learn may be stored in their brains in one language and some stored in another. To help them develop the rich, deep vocabulary understanding they need to become successful readers, they need explicit learning experiences in both languages. Teachers and parents need to work together to be sure young readers hear open-ended questions, play with word sounds, and experience all the other strategies in this article in both English and their home language.