

Fostering Healthy Language Development in Young Children: A Journey in Relationships

by Susan Weber

The development of speech and language in the young child is truly a marvel, full of wonder for those who accompany its unfolding. We know intuitively that speaking arises from a mysterious place, one that has fascinated linguists for a long, long time. The Gospel of St. John begins with the very image of language development: "In the beginning was the Word." The creative energy of the Word is understood, in Rudolf Steiner's description, as a formative power, building even our physical bodies. It is no wonder, then, that coming into language is of such monumental importance, and that the adults in the young child's environment have such a profound influence on this process. The Word is a powerful force. Poets, writers, orators, and each of us change the world through our speech. Language is the gift the gods give to humanity for our creative activity.

This creative force of the Word can be experienced in the child's earliest expeditions into language. The child's magical made-up words, concrete descriptions of the world around him, and unique phrasings wake up our own hearing. The Word is fully animate to the child and each word contains a world within it: "I thought 'boxing' was a word that hit," a young child said to his mother. Backhoe becomes "hackbow," butterfly becomes "flutterfly."

At each stage of the first seven years of development, children delight us first with babbling, then with the utterance of "Mama" or "Papa," followed by words, names, phrases and increasingly complex syntax enriched by an ever-broadening vocabulary. Daily experience brings every detail of the child's environment into words. Many steps unfold as the child's language capacity grows. Eventually, our kindergarteners greet us with their rhyming word play, their interest in riddles they scarcely yet understand, and their extraordinary memory for each linguistic turn of phrase in a complex fairy tale.

But what comes in between? Most importantly, what is it that draws forth the child's ability to work, play, and live as a speaking human being? As with other capacities that unfold during the first three years of life, speech requires not only human relationship and example, but also the existence of forces within and beyond the child herself. Initially, the adult leads the child into speech and language through intimate relationship. Within this sacred space, the adult both speaks and listens, enabling the first communication through spoken language to come forth.

Clearly, for language to emerge there must be an "I" and a "Thou," adult and child. Over days and months, a foundation of nonverbal communication is built: a listening to one another without a single word. Is my baby hungry, or tired, or cold? Is mama coming to get me now? Is she happy to hear me? Will she feed me? The parent learns early to differentiate the language of crying, and also to observe and read the gesture of her child: Is she still hungry for another mouthful or has she turned her head away from the spoon, signaling that she is full, satisfied? Does she wish to be picked up from her crib? The

baby stretches out her arms in a gesture of active openness, a gesture that tells a whole story. The child, too, learns to read the gestural as well as verbal communication of parents and caregivers.

The more sensitive and rich these elements of interpersonal communication are, the more deeply does the child become a communicating being. The adult welcomes the child by creating a spiritual space into which the child enters and dialogue arises. When the adult speaks with interest, warmth and respect, the child listens with her whole being. Without question, the adult's speech *toward* the child is central to this phase.

Gradually, the child's speech unfolds: he takes hold of his world and, as Karl König describes so artistically, words "rain down" upon him. Dialogue between adult and child about daily life, their mutual interests and activities, remains central. Tenderly the child begins to speak. But at first it is as if this capacity to express words is a secret between parent and child. Parents often say, "But he speaks so much at home!" And truly, the child's home — that protected space that is the child's world — is the mystery center in which the miracle of language blossoms. Step by step, the child will gradually select other adults with whom to speak — a grandparent, a neighbor, a playgroup leader, a friend's parent.

If we observe closely, we will see that young two-year-olds do not often converse with one another. One child will speak to the other, but the second child is seemingly deaf to the words, as if the child were not speaking to *him*. As adults, we still remain the primary language partners *and models*. Seen from the context of Rudolf Steiner's description of the twelve senses, our *sense of the word* has developed through the presence of our Ego. This enables the possibility for real listening, whereas before the child says "I" to himself at around age three this sense is not yet adequately active to enable true listening to the other.

But let us peek in at a group of four- and five-year-olds. As a community of speakers, they almost seem to exclude the adults. They now have a secret language among themselves! As the adults, *we* have receded into the background.

Language acquisition is a gradual process, individual for every child, with its numerous delicate transitions unfolding either quickly or slowly. The path is wholly individual, not unlike walking. Tremendously subtle linguistic structures have been built, and linkages have been created within the brain, the speech motor mechanism, and with the outside world. Invisible word-threads have been woven with the whole surrounding world, creating a tapestry that belongs solely to the child himself. We recall the stages:

- Babbling – The baby's earliest babbling encompasses all the sounds of the universe and all the language groups of the earth;
- Selection – The baby gradually selects out the phonemes of his own language, and sounds that he does not hear in his environment fall away;
- Encapsulation of meaning in words, then phrases, then "telescopic" phrases of noun and verb that express a complete concept.

All of these stages occur within the context of adults speaking to children. When does this most naturally occur during infancy? During those moments that arise out of personal relationship. And where is this relationship most logically and naturally expressed? It is within the activities of daily care — diapering, feeding, dressing, bathing. Emmi Pikler, through her work as a family pediatrician and later at the Pikler Institute in Budapest, recognized this aspect of the child's life as primary for the activation of many developmental themes for infants and toddlers. Magda Gerber also brought these insights from her experiences with Dr. Pikler to North America through her work in the United States at RIE (Resources for Infant Educators).

Can any of us picture carrying out these basic caregiving tasks in silence? It is not easily imaginable. Observe mothers with their infants and young children. If we hear and observe silence, our pedagogical intuition is alerted, actively searching for a source, a reason, a path to understanding the genesis of this *unnatural* behavior.

The adult continuously expands the child's language through natural dialogue, embellishing and extending the conversation as the child's language becomes ever more expressive.

Those who have studied the work of the Pikler Institute and RIE cannot help but encounter in themselves a deep interest in the unfolding of language. The work of RIE often brings questions from Waldorf early childhood teachers about "talking to children," since we have been encouraged to work with the young child out of imitation, artistically and through gesture, to guide the child through his will and engagement with life. With children from three to seven, we can understand this way of working. However, with the child who is just coming into language or has not even begun to speak, something different is needed. The child's language organism awakens through stimulation from without, and *we* are the source of that stimulation.

Rainer Patzlaff's booklet, *Childhood Falls Silent*, originally published by the Australian Association for Rudolf Steiner Early Childhood Education, offers a compelling description of the situation for many children. In this booklet (now out of print, but soon to be available in an online version from AWSNA), Patzlaff cites research in which the physical imitation of the motor mechanism of speech from one human being to another was observed:

With great surprise kinesthetics found that the listener answers the perceived speech with just the same fine motor movements as the speaker unconsciously performs, also incorporating the whole body and with a delay of only 40 to 50 milliseconds, precluding the possibility of conscious reaction. Condon, the one responsible for this discovery, describes the astonishing synchronicity of movements in the speaker and listener as follows: "Figuratively speaking it is as if the whole body of the listener was dancing in precise and flowing accompaniment to the perceived speech." . . . It is as if both speaker and listener are moving in a

common medium of rhythmic movement. And this applies only for speech sounds, not for noise or disjointed vowels, as repeated tests have proven . . . A two-day-old baby in the USA reacts to spoken Chinese with the same minute movements as to spoken American-English.¹

At the Pikler Institute in Budapest, the caregiver develops her intimate relationship with each child not only through her touch and the sharing and playfulness that occur during caregiving times together, but also through her voice. In a musical, natural way, the caregiver engages the child with rich, rhythmic language; she speaks to the preverbal child from earliest infancy, and he responds with his eyes, his gestures of collaboration, his interaction. This is precisely the activity Patzlaff describes as essential for human development. “Whether we recognize it or not, we have an effect on the physical body of the child through the spoken word and we consequently influence the emotional and spiritual possibilities for the child’s development later in life. Which of us is aware of this immense responsibility when we talk to a child?”²

How *do* we support the unfolding of language? This is a critically important question in our times in which children experience so much ‘mechanical’ language, but less and less human discourse. Patzlaff details the decline in language capacity of children over the past several decades:

Joachim Kutsche found some bitter words for it [speech falling silent] in the magazine *Der Spiegel* (38/1993): “Whether at home at the dinner table or in the car on the road, in German families (what’s left of them), people don’t converse. At most functional instructions are still in use: “Don’t be so late!”; “Leave that!”; “Hurry up!”; and the binary answers of the little ones: ‘Yes.’ ‘No.’ ‘Yes’ . . . end of conversation.

. . . In 1997 a leading insurance company felt compelled to publish a book with the title *Talk To Me!* with the sole purpose being to stimulate parents to speak with their child!³

The advent of the ubiquitous cellular telephone, hand-held movies, and recorded stories for little children in the course of the fifteen years since this research was shared only increases the urgency of our need to engage with our children through language. Clearly, children learn to speak by being spoken to. The musicality of the adult’s speech with the infant bathes the child in the Word, introducing the holy capacity that makes us human. In the earliest stages of language development, it is essential that the adult speaks to the child. We are the *source* of language!

We serve forever as models for children’s language development, but in the later years of early childhood our role is transformed. As kindergarten teachers especially, the *functional* aspects of speaking recede and the *artistic* aspects — storytelling, poetry, recitation — come forward more strongly. The children speak with each other! Our stepping back creates the opportunity for *listening to* the child, for ensuring that he feels seen and heard as the individual he is becoming.

Our task as educators and caregivers is to understand and differentiate the kinds of speech that we offer to children in relation to their developmental stages. Language is an essential tool for providing the child with orientation in time and space, and in the early years, language together with gesture is intrinsic to guiding children.

One can picture a caregiver approaching a young child with the intention to pick him up for a diaper change. The adult's thoughts are clear, her intentions far along the path into will activity. But the child may be unaware of the adult's intention, and when the adult arrives, the child is only then entering into the process of participating in this caregiving activity. For the child to engage himself fully and comfortably in relaxed and happy anticipation, he needs time to prepare himself. He must change his focus, let go of involvement with his play or another activity, and recognize both the adult and the anticipated diapering. No matter how intimate the relationship, if the adult unexpectedly picks up the child without making eye contact and verbal contact, the child's startle reflex may be activated and he may express distress or, in a somewhat older child, resistance. Repeated activation of the startle reflex in this way may cause a child to sustain a high stress level, which over time interferes with healthy well-being in numerous ways. Alternately, when the adult approaches the child slowly and uses her voice to indicate her presence, when she orients the child through words and gesture about what will happen, the child now has a "response time." These precious seconds — the waiting, the respectful pause — make all the difference: "Hello, Sadie, I'm here for you. It's diaper time."

This simple, natural and direct approach is deeply integrated into the caregiving practices that have evolved at the Pikler Institute. Soft, melodic, musical speech accompanies all caregiving activity, serving to engage the child delicately, stimulate his own language development, and build the relationship between adult and child.

However, these conversations do not involve the kind of aimless chatter or premature conversations that draw a child out of his *doing* by bringing unneeded consciousness to his activity. But the older child who has unfolded a life of fantasy and imagination is a very different being from the infant or toddler just beginning to savor the joy of language, the power of speaking, and the intimacy of words exchanged with others.

With toddlers, the adult's language is also crucial to helping them navigate situations involving conflict with other children. Children need to know boundaries and to receive strategies for problem-solving from the adults around them. Once the period has passed in which distraction is effective as a strategy for guiding behavior, young children *want* and *need* to engage their peers and adults in conflict, to test their emerging feeling of self and to understand themselves in the context of social relationships. As adults, we help children navigate this transition through our loving support and our gift of language. We express boundaries for appropriate and inappropriate behavior through speech, and through our words we offer simple solutions for toddler conflict.

As adult speakers in the child's environment, we are the bridge that enables the child to unfold her full humanity. Rhythm, cadence and the metric forms of the mother tongue are offered throughout the child's waking hours as invitations to step further into living relationship with others. We pass to the child the gift of language once given to us. Through our activity as human beings who speak with one another, the holy journey begins.

¹Rainer Patzlaff, *Childhood Falls Silent: The loss of speech and how we need to foster speech in the age of media* (Australian Association for Rudolf Steiner Early Childhood Education, undated) p.8. Originally published in German by the International Association of Waldorf Kindertages, Stuttgart.

²Ibid., p. 10.

³Ibid., pp. 2-3.

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