



Ontario Association for Families of Children with Communication Disorders OAFCCD

Preschool Language Development An Overview

What changes are observable in children's language in the preschool years? As children advance from simple one and two word utterances, their utterances become longer and more complex. Children gradually elaborate on the way they say things by adding more detail. In terms of syntactic development they add and fill in words and word endings that were previously missing. These take the form of articles (a, the), prepositions (in, on), pronouns (I, he), auxiliary verbs (is, are), and noun endings (such as -s, which indicates plurality), and verb endings (such as -ed, which indicates past tense). The inclusion of these forms into children's speech makes their utterances seem more like adults and less like a telegram!

In the early preschool years, children's vocabulary continues to grow and they learn many new word meanings. They learn new concepts and how to code these concepts linguistically. They also learn how to transform their ideas into sentences, and they begin to use a variety of sentence types; Causal constructions (He didn't get a prize because he was bad), Conditional constructions (If I clean up, I'll get to watch TV); and Temporal constructions (When he will come, he'll get a surprise). Children learn more complex ways to use language socially, and they begin to develop discourse skills such as participating in conversations, giving instructions, and providing descriptions about objects, events, and people. By the time children enter grade one, they are able to use language for a variety of functions: to contribute new information on a topic; to describe objects, events, past experiences, and plans; and to use language to demonstrate, instruct, and reason.

Last, in the preschool years, children progress from talking about events in the "here and now" to talking about events in the "there and then". Young children generally talk about events and objects that are present in the immediate context. They refer to what they are doing or what another person is doing in the immediate environment. Also, maternal input to younger children focuses on events and objects in the immediate environment. As children develop cognitively, they begin to refer to people, objects, actions, and events that are displaced in terms of time and place. They talk about past and future events and about

Progress can be seen as the child's communication expands from:

"More milk" to "I want more Chocolate milk." or "Mommy car" to "Mommy is going in the car."

By the age of 4, most children's syntax is adult like. Their utterances contain expanded noun and verb phrases: "gimme the big red ball." "he pushed me down the steps," negative sentences: "I won't do it," yes/no questions: "Can you cut the cake?" and what/when/where/why questions: "What will we do later?"

objects and activities in the absence of external props or contextual support. How early this ability emerges is being studied.

Vocabulary continues to grow throughout the school years. The use of non-literal language, such as jokes, riddles, and metaphors, begins to appear in middle childhood along with the comprehension of sentences that contain verbs such as *promise* or *ask*. Ambiguous sentences which allow for more than one interpretation, such as “The chili is too hot to eat,” are understood a bit later, during middle childhood and early preadolescence.

Although children’s language has reached a measure of complexity by the age of 5, much communicative development is yet to come.

In addition, during the school-age years, children expand their pragmatic and discourse skills. Their conversational abilities become refined, and they are better able to plan, organize, and sequence their ideas into coherent and cohesive units called narratives. Further, during this period children develop the ability to think and talk about language (called metalinguistic ability) and master language in another mode by learning to read and write. Finally, children’s language skills advance to the point that they can understand by listening or reading without any contextual support, a critical skill for academic success. These are also the skills necessary to master a foreign language, and mathematical concepts needed to solve word problems and algebraic equations.

Although a good deal of language learning has already been mastered by the time the child enters Grade one, this is only the beginning and the child will continue to develop and refine language skills even into young adulthood.

Source: Dr. Genese Warr-Leeper, School of Communication Disorders, University of Western Ontario, September 1996