

Improving oral language skills

Over the years, it has become commonplace to hear reports relating to the ever-decreasing literacy and numeracy skills in education. In part, teachers have received a portion of the blame, with some stating that teachers' skills and professional development is preventing them from delivering curriculums in ways that prove advantageous for every student. As such, governments have stepped in and built curriculums, developed standardised testing methods and commissioned reports (such as Gonski) that support their predictions about children's underwhelming academic skills. While the statistics do not lie, it is perhaps a little short-sighted to believe that it is one profession's deficiencies, pedagogies and theoretical frameworks that have prevented literacy skills improving since the 1960's. This statement has not been made with the intention of finding a new finger to point. Any profession can and should always strive to do and be better. With that said, however, it is important to remember that a child's learning does not singularly occur within a school or education environment. Instead, they are influenced by all of the environments they live in and have contact with, for example, with their primary caregivers, where they play sport, where they go shopping, the places they visit, the people they come into contact with, the types of technologies they use, and the types of relationships they have with each.

It is alarming yet not that surprising to learn that it is not just children's literacy and numeracy skills that are on the decline. A simple internet search, a spot of research and/or a conversation with a health nurse will tell you that children's gross and fine motor skills have significantly decreased over the years. Conversations with child psychologists (along with research) will similarly support the idea that social and emotional skills are somewhat shifting gears, and it is not in the direction that helps children to become strong, confident and resilient individuals. Given the idea that skill deficits are coming in short and fast, the next series of articles to be published will look at the ways that developmental skills might be bolstered, thus helping to give children an extra boost to shorten the gap between where they are and where we might want them to end up. The first article attached to this series will focus on oral language skills.

What are oral language skills?

Without knowing what oral language skills are, it might be easy to assume that they refer to a child's ability to speak. While this assumption is true, it does not cover the full complexity of the situation. Delivered in a shortened way, oral language skills comprise of five components: morphological skills; pragmatics; semantics or vocabulary; phonological skills; and syntax. Without a degree or the time to research the meaning of each, these terms can be a little overwhelming and, in all honesty, somewhat pointless for adults who are not speech therapists or teachers to learn. To prove a point, let's consider children and parents of the sixties. As a whole, it is agreed that literacy and numeracy rates were of a slightly higher standard than they are today. Parents of these children knew nothing of the term oral language or its importance, yet their children still achieved literacy and numeracy rates that were higher than the average student today. But how can that be, especially considering that modern-day parents are so focused on making sure that they provide as much as they can for their children today? The next section will explore the possible reasons.

The oral language skills of generations past

Many debates do and will continue to claim why children's oral language skills haven't improved for over six decades. Sometimes the plethora of research can blind mankind in being able to pinpoint what has or is going wrong and what we might do to fix it. While it cannot be said that parents of yesteryear were better than today's parents, it can be said that they did not have the challenges that modern-day parents face today. To begin, the nuclear family often had one parent working while the other was at home. This increase of parental availability did not mean that parents were always more attentive but rather that there were not exposed to the huge pressures placed on family time. As such, conversations were not on constant repeat whereby children are being told to hurry up and get ready because the clock is ticking and someone needs to be somewhere (or worse still, everyone needs to be somewhere but none of those places are the same

location). The stress of having to be somewhere else can mean that conversations are shortened to involve the instructions of what needs to be achieved. Furthermore, the tone and style in which instructions are (on occasion) delivered and received can leave adults and children feeling more stressed and less likely to practice normal social conventions, for example, when tempers are higher than normal, people cut in and speak over one another, grammar and vocabulary can typically become reduced. In short, households that live in a constant cycle of needing to be somewhere else are more likely to practice habits that do oral language skills an injustice.

In addition to the above, children today are drawn to technology more than they ever were (or could be). Forms of technology like social media shun the norms of grammar and even go as far as promoting the use of images and acronyms instead of actual words. While it is not new for teens to design their own words to alternatively describe something, it is likely that many students from the past could and would have still used an extended vocabulary with their peers, all of which would have been rich with grammar, thus helping them to communicate using sentences that adhered to the rules of one's written language. Given that communication had to occur via face-to-face rather than through text or computer game, it is likely that they were getting to practice oral language skills more frequently. As such, this argument creates an explanation that is continuously being preached by researchers – the more we practice at anything, the more skilled we become.

With the ever-constricting routines many modern-day families face, it is not surprising that some parts of a family's routine have taken a turn towards extinction. One such example refers to mealtimes. Before television was readily available in households, families would (and of course this refers to the stereotype of the era) sit together to have meals. These times meant that families would share stories about their days and practice the very oral language skills that are reportedly amiss today. As such, conversations about one's day provided yet another reference point where children were able to practice these ever-important skills.

Identifying opportunities to promote oral language skills

While it might be nice to resurrect the missing hours of the day, it is not a necessary ingredient in being able to find other ways to successfully support the development of children's oral language skills. Instead, other simple hacks can be used. One of the most important is being mindful of the time available and using it wisely. At dinner time, the television can be turned off. At first, the gasps of disbelief might be heard from the neighbouring suburb, but it can quickly become the norm if those implementing the rule persevere for a few days. Naturally, this suggestion leads towards the idea that all mealtimes should be technology free. While technology is not an evil thing, it is one of the biggest conversation-killers, thus making it one of the factors that will continue to inhibit the opportunities children have to practise their oral language skills.

When travelling between one destination and the next, play games and start conversations. Conversations should not focus on what the child has or has not done or the fact that they had ten million reminders to get their homework done the previous night. Create a topic which the conversations can revolve around. Even if conversations are focused on listening to children explain what they did on Roblox, they will still be speaking. Encouraging conversations whereby the child gets to speak and answer questions opens the gateway to improved possibilities. When having conversations with children, use an expanded vocabulary. Instead of saying, "It sounds like you liked that", add uncommonly used adjectives, for example, "that sounds extraordinary and somewhat complicated". The addition of complex and less familiar words expands the possibility of any given conversation and in turn promotes the development of oral language.

Even the most time-poor adult can locate moments, however brief they might be, whereby oral language opportunities can be created. Even when rushing, conversations can and do happen all the time, for example, drying a child off as they get out of the bath. Research even supports the idea of conversing with children when they are having their nappy changed or when helping them to put their shoes on. It is in these moments that children can practice their language skills without them even knowing it. And if this is the case,

then one could argue that these experiences have just as much significance in aiding a child's development as a formal classroom.

Part of developing good oral language skills means that children need to be able to pronounce and hear the sounds in words (phonological awareness). As such, children who are exposed to environments where language is articulated will give them the upper hand. Therefore, the importance of pronouncing words correctly will have an invaluable impact on a child's oral language rating.

Another important aspect of learning to master oral language skills is to ensure children get to practise the art of being an active participant of conversations. Social conventions typically dictate that one person speaks at a time and that the others listen until it is their time to respond. Now-a-days, children are lucky enough to live in a world where adults have (for the most part) dropped the belief that children should be seen and not heard. While this is a great step forward, it is important for children to understand that they are a participant and not the sole director of any conversation. Encouraging them to share their ideas and then wait their turn to speak creates an environment whereby they will become skilled communicators. To be a skilled communicator one must be equally adept at listening as they are at speaking. They also must be able to read a situation and understand if empathy or another emotion is required. In short, they must be able to interpret a range of situations because without such skills they may struggle to lead others, sustain relationships and maintain a general level of wellbeing later in life.

Recapping the main ideas

There is a reported decrease in developmental skills among children today. One skill in a state of decline is that of oral language. While there are five elements that combine to create oral language skills, it is not necessarily important for non-professional adults to learn what each element means. Instead, all adults need to provide is a greater degree of opportunities for interaction and communication. Even the most time-poor families can produce conversational moments and use these to promote the skills of listening, talking and interpreting social situations. In years gone past, children did not have the technological distractions that they now face. They conversed face-to-face at a greater level and, although they often developed their own slang, they practiced oral language skills more frequently than many children today. The importance of practicing and engaging in real conversations that do not use images or acronyms cannot be understated. Pronunciation and articulation are key to developing the ability to hearing sounds (phonological awareness) and thus being able to use those sounds to decipher written text and work out how to spell. In turn, learning how to communicate and practicing it at every given opportunity will help to raise children's oral language skills and perhaps see their literacy rates rise for the first time since the sixties.

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