Developing Listening and Speaking Skills

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We need to put to rest the old saying, "Children should be seen and not heard." Research shows, beyond question, that children gain language skills valuable for their success in reading and writing through talking as well as listening to teachers and peers.

When children are encouraged to participate in conversations, they learn to:
- Use spoken language for a variety of purposes.
- Follow and give simple directions and instructions.
- Ask and answer questions.
- Use appropriate volume and speed when they speak.
- Follow the rules of polite conversation, such as staying on a topic and taking turns.
- Use language to express and describe their feelings and ideas.
- Listen carefully for different purposes, such as to get information or for enjoyment.

When you participate in conversations with children:
- Ask open-ended questions that invite them to expand upon their answers.
- Present new words to the children to expand their vocabularies.
- Respond to questions and let the children take the conversational lead.

Here are five things you can do to help develop and expand your children's listening and speaking skills:

1) Engage children in conversation throughout the day.

Teacher Talk:
- Why did you color the house orange, Rana?
- Look at all the birds at our bird feeder this morning. What different ones do you see?

2) When reading aloud to children, encourage them to predict what will happen in the story, to comment on the story, and to make connections between the story and their personal experiences.

Teacher Talk:
- What do you think will happen when Boomer gets on the school bus?
- What did you like best about Boomer's day in school?
- What is the funniest thing your pet does?

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3) Play games that will focus children's attention on the importance of listening carefully.

Teacher Talk:
- Put your heads down and close your eyes. Listen very carefully. Can you hear the lawn mower outside? Can you hear water dripping in the sink? What else do you hear?

4) Gently reinforce the rules of good listening and speaking throughout the day.

Teacher Talk:
- Connor, listen to Yulia when she is talking. You will have a turn next.
- Tyler, thank Joann for helping you with your drawing.
- Ask before you take a book. Someone else may be using it.
- Only ask questions about the book right now. We'll talk about other things later.

5) Capitalize on routine opportunities to have the children follow or give directions.

Teacher Talk:
- It's time for snack. If you are wearing Velcro shoes come to the round table and if you are wearing tie shoes come to the square table.
- Kaylee, please go to the bookrack and bring me the book with the red flower on its cover.
- Mitch, go to the block box. Get two green blocks. Please take them to Julio.
- Tanya, will you tell Howie how to put this puzzle together?

Source: Excerpted from Teaching Our Youngest: A Guide for Preschool Teachers & Child Care & Family Providers, U.S. Department of Education.

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