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HALDIMAND-NORFOLK HEALTH UNIT

COMMUNICATION MATTERS

A NEWSLETTER FOR PARENTS, TEACHERS, EARLY LEARNING PROVIDERS AND CAREGIVERS OF PRESCHOOL-AGED CHILDREN.

NEW RESEARCH CONCLUDES:

basic, non-electronic toys are better for parent-toddler communication!

What a relief for parents to hear that expensive, tech-enhanced child's toys are not required for language development! Although many of these are marketed to parents as beneficial, they are not nearly as effective as basic toys.

Electronic toys, such as talking farms, baby laptops and baby cellphones, lessen the quality and quantity of verbal interaction parents have with children when compared to less expensive, traditional toys such as blocks, puzzles and board books.

This was the finding of Anna V. Sosa, associate professor of communication sciences and disorders at Northern Arizona University, and lead author of the study:

<http://archpedi.jamanetwork.com/article.aspx?articleid=2478386#Conclusions>

Previous studies have determined that the amount and quality of language exposure children receive influences their language development. In other words, we already know that infants and toddlers need to hear a variety of words.

<http://www.2000wordstogrow.ca/>

But Sosa and her team focused on the type of toy, and how too much electronic talking may put parents on the sidelines of communicating with their kids.

The researchers recorded interactions between a small group of mostly white, educated families – either a mom or a dad and a child, 10-16 months of age – over three days, playing for two 15-minute sessions each with three separate groups of toys: electronic talking toys; simple toys like animal puzzles and blocks; and board books about animals, shapes and colors.

Parents on average used the most words per minute (67) when playing with books, compared to 56 per minute with the puzzles and blocks, and only 40 words per minute with the electronic toys. The electronic toys yielded the fewest conversational turns, child vocalizations, parental responses and content-specific words (meaning the words the toys were meant to elicit, such as animal names, colors and shapes).



Given the results – which were consistent regardless of age or sex of the child, as well as whether the parents considered themselves talkative – **Sosa recommends parents limit play time with electronic toys and focus more on activities that promote parent-child interaction.**

These findings were no surprise to me: I have been a speech-language pathologist (SLP) in Haldimand Norfolk for over 25 years. When I started my job, there were more basic toys, and fewer electronic toys available. In my work, I often ventured into homes to help train parents in the ways of language stimulation for their language-delayed toddlers and preschoolers. I am a Hanen® Certified SLP, and have offered many programs over

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the years such as “It Takes Two to Talk” and “Target Word”. I still remember encountering my first ever talking Fisher Price farm, and noticing the child and parent became much quieter when playing with this toy. The toy did all the talking. The child interacted with the toy, and the parent really was side-lined. Both the parent-child interaction, and word-use were negatively impacted.

Almost within the same year, I encountered V-tech toys, phones and push-button toys. If you pushed the button shaped like a ball, you heard “ball”. If you pushed the one that looked like a dad, you heard “daddy”. Or, depending on the speed of the child: “ba-bbb-ba-ba-ball” or “duh-duh-duh-dad-dad-daddy”. How annoying!

It wasn't long before parents and I concluded that the best way to increase the likelihood of word-productions by the child was to remove the batteries so you could play with the farm in the usual way. And eliminate the phone and the V-tech toys from any play situation you were hoping to practice strategies in, or elicit language. Some of these toys had been donated to our program, and I realized they were not going to be nearly as useful as I had originally thought they would.

In the last decade, tablets and iPads have become popular with parents. Marketers and advertisers have taken advantage and promoted many apps that target language skills. I suggest that, like TV and videos, these devices are useful for occupying children so parents can do something else (like have a shower, make dinner). They can be used as a reward. But they have little value in promoting parent-child interaction or language development. They have their uses, but education in the ways of communication isn't one. In my experience, once a child has a

device like this in their hands, most interaction and communication with another person ceases.

So if you have ever wondered: “What's the best educational toy I can get for language development? What should I buy?” There isn't one you can buy. The best investment in your child is your time.

YOU are the best toy in the house.

A parent, grandparent, or caregiver, who is tuned in to a child and waits for him to initiate, who joins in a pressure-free, playful interaction and keeps going until he tires of it will always be more effective than any toy, video or app. And when these interactions happen all day, every day, the quantity and quality of language a child hears increases. You have the relationship and the repeated daily routines (bath time, bedtime, diaper-changing) that have the greatest potential for language-learning.

TURN OFF!



It's tough to tune in to what's most important nowadays. Screens are everywhere. We used to discuss the negative impact of television on children, and now we can add tablets, cellphones, smart phones and social communication devices. I worry about the impact on all children, especially my own. However, even I have difficulty resisting the temptation to look at my device when it flashes or hums. I imagine many younger, savvier new moms have even more difficulty resisting that. Even faced with the most crucial interaction of her life, she would be unable to resist looking away from her baby/toddler, on a regular basis.

The most crucial interactions are the ones parents have with their baby, toddler and preschooler. They might seem mundane: changing a diaper, getting into a car, feeding times, bath time, play time at home, at the park, or pushing the stroller down the street to get the mail. The moments are too numerous over the course of a day to even remember them all. Providing the attention that a child needs is a full-time job that requires great focus. It is why many parents are unable to recall what they did during the day, what they accomplished, or whether they had a shower. Especially if there's more than one child present!

Before technology came along, many moms and dads had difficulty meeting these needs due to work, or trauma (like



loss of a parent), or worse (addictions, abuse, neglect). Many affected children have difficulty finding any adults to attach to, and become youth and young adults with significant difficulties, social, emotional and academic.

Now that we have technology, children have to compete with it to have their needs met. You've probably seen this: child riding in a stroller, or swinging on a swing, or waiting in the doctor's office, seeking attention, crying or saying the words: *mommy? Mama? Mom? Mom?* And the parent, tuned into a device. He might look up to notice the child's initiation, but then look away the next time the device calls to him.

Sometimes you gotta have it on (probably much less than you care to admit). But if you want to promote your child's interaction and language skills, turn it off. And most definitely, don't hand one to your baby or toddler..... an article on that below:

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/cris-rowan/10-reasons-why-handheld-devices-should-be-banned_b_4899218.html



TUNE IN!

When babies are born, they are wired to begin learning. They begin communicating with sounds, actions, eye-gaze and facial expressions. They might not know these have any meaning until their caregivers consistently respond to them. They gradually learn their messages have an effect on other people, and then begin to send these messages intentionally.

Any time an adult responds to a message, either verbally or nonverbally, and the child responds back, an interaction has started. It is within these early back-and-forth interactions that the foundation for all a child's future conversations is built. When children have fun interactions with an adult, they learn a number of skills that can help them become good conversation partners. They learn some basic rules of conversation, even before they use their first word.

Children learn how to:

- initiate an interaction with someone
- respond when someone else initiates
- take a turn
- give another person the chance to take a turn
- pay attention to speaker
- send message
- continue a conversation, by taking another turn
- repair misunderstandings
- stay on the topic
- start a new topic

The Hanen Center (www.hanen.org) has many tips and resources for encouraging interaction:

1. **Make sure the child starts the interaction:** Watch him carefully. What is he looking at? Playing with? Which activities or routines does he like best? It doesn't matter what it's about, just whether your child is interested and engaged. A sink full of soapy water or a broken cupboard door can make for a fun interaction that goes back and forth a few times if your child is interested.
2. **Respond with enthusiasm:** research shows that when an adult responds promptly and enthusiastically to their child's message, by saying something related, this encourages the child's language development.

For example:

Jacob (age 2 ½ with a language delay), tries to open cupboard, but the handle is broken. He looks at dad, points and says "duh!"
Dad immediately joins Jacob at the door, points to the handle and says "Broken! The door is broken".
In this way, Jacob's dad encourages him to communicate, by letting him know he heard the message, and is interested in it.

Notice dad doesn't ask a question, he makes a comment. Often children (especially those with language delay) are bombarded with questions that might show interest (*Oh, what happened? Do you know what's wrong with the door? Where is the handle?*) but that Jacob could not answer with his limited vocabulary. Other questions to avoid are testing questions, or those that are intended to coax a child to talk (*Oh, what color is the door? Can you say it? Say 'black', come on Jacob, you can say it!*)

3. **Keep the conversation going when your child responds again.** The longer the interaction, the more opportunities a child has to practice communicating and learn from the adult.

For example,

Jacob raises his hands, giving dad a questioning look as if to

say "What happened?"

Dad says "the handle came off! The handle is gone!" He makes the 'gone' gesture.

Jacob points again to the handle, imitating dad's 'gone' gesture saying "gah" (for 'gone').

Dad encourages "Yes, gone. The handle is gone! Daddy has to fix the handle".

In this example, Jacob is able practice initiating an interaction, responding to dad, taking another turn, waiting for dad to take his turn, paying attention, sending a clear message, and staying on the topic! All because dad responded with enthusiasm to something his son was interested in, and made an effort to keep the interaction going. And he ignored his phone, which was buzzing away in the background (sorry, couldn't resist!)

When your child is sleeping, and you want to tune into a screen, check us out! www.hnhu.org/speech

Here you will find information about the Haldimand Norfolk Preschool Speech and Language Program, articles, on-line referrals, and access to the Haldimand Norfolk Health Unit website.

Main story submitted by Lori Holstein, Senior Speech-Language Pathologist

Reminder: No child is too young to be seen in our program! To decide if you should refer your child, see our checklist at <https://nhu.org/health-topic/communication-check-list/>

However, a child might be too OLD to be seen in our program. The cut-off for referrals is June 30th prior to the start of junior kindergarten entry.

Call us:

- if your child is not attending JK, or
- you are interested in private practice, or
- to discuss accessing school-based speech and language services in senior kindergarten:

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Does your 18 month old have 20 words? Are you concerned about your child's speech? Call HNHU Preschool Speech and Language receptionist @ 519-426-6170 Ext. 3243 or visit www.hnhu.org/speech to make a referral.

Communication Matters is published biannually by the Haldimand-Norfolk Preschool Speech and Language program. It has been developed to increase awareness for services available and tips on the prevention of speech, language or hearing disorders in the preschool population. This newsletter is intended for parents, teachers and caregivers of preschool-aged children. You are invited to contact the Health Unit with your articles and ideas.



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