

The Importance of Speech in the Life of the Young Child

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The early childhood years are without doubt the years of *movement*! This is the child's main activity, way of discovering and making connections to the world. What aspects of speech further and support the child at this tender age?

Practically all of teaching and much of life takes place via the spoken word. For the listener, especially in the case of the young child, the *how* of what is heard is part of the *what*: the various qualities of the vowels and consonants, the rising and falling rhythms, the "sound-pictures", the imaginations, and all other nuances of the inner activity of the speaker. All of this is part of how spoken language behaves, i.e. how it *moves*. It is these aspects of language that sustain and foster the young child's connection to the world and are therefore part of early childhood education.

The speech in the environment of the young child is one of the most prominent and formative sense impressions. Dr. Jane Healy reminds us in her book *Endangered Minds: Why Children Can't Think and What We Can Do About It*, when referring to research carried out by Priscilla Vail, that "most learning disabilities are related to underlying language problems, and yet increasing numbers of youngsters are permitted to be 'linguistically malnourished.'"

These important sense impressions come to the child via the sense of hearing, which is under tremendous assault today, for example through the many forms of noise pollution. High decibel levels as well as excessive electronic auditory input undermine the development of the ear and of language. At stake here is the development of a sense by which we cultivate *awareness of our surroundings* as well as an "inner ear" for our own *conscience*— both essential social capacities. It is therefore of paramount importance that we sensitize and cultivate the sense of hearing.

Parents telling or reading bedtime stories to children can best support their child's develop-

ment by being fully present and, besides speaking well, really following the story and its unfolding pictures. Because children's stories are written simply, the temptation is great for a busy parent to think about other things while reading. This, however, leaves the child with the mere acoustic aspect of speech, while the core of it remains empty, signifying an enormous deprivation to a child. The health-bestowing factor of the parent's full presence is important for both parent and child. In this way, language and speaking become a source of nourishment for the individual as well as a practice of attention and focus.

We need to also take care to not be overly wordy in what we say. Giving too much information at this age undermines the calm security and trust in "the given", which must become a foundation for the child's later health and inner development. Too much content draws the child into the head and encourages precocious reflection and discernment, whereas these early movement years are best furthered when the speech that is heard connects the child in confidence with life through the warmth and simplicity of the adult's inner engagement.

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