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Language Development and Narratives

“Language is an incredibly rich guidebook for the world” - Boroditsky

Parents play an important role in the language development of their children. According to Salmon and Reese, “The more parents talk to their children, the faster their children’s language develops” (Salmon and Reese, 2016). This learning starts very early with children, about as early as children are able to perceive speech. Children’s brains have dedicated neural pathways that are “experience expectant”, meaning they are ready to receive auditory information and organize it for language development (Kleinknecht, 2024). They are also “experience dependent”, meaning that they require social interactions, and the language patterns that will develop depend on what social interactions a child experiences (Kleinknecht, 2024). An example of this is when children learn the language of their parents. When a baby is born, they are able to perceive all of the phonemes of any language. As they listen to the language of their parents, they begin to selectively focus on just the phonemes of their parent’s language. It may not seem like a baby would benefit from listening to a parent talk, but even if the baby can’t understand the meaning of words, they benefit from exposure to language.

As a child gets older, the importance of social interactions with parents continues, if not becoming even more important. Children at the early talking stage don’t use many complex sentences or vocabulary, but they benefit immensely from being exposed to higher levels of language. One technique for providing this exposure is reminiscing with children about the past because talking about the past requires more complex sentence compositions. A good example of

this is when a parent asks their child questions about an event in the past. Then, with each response the child gives, the parent elaborates on their simple sentences to add more details. The effects of this elaborative reminiscing can be seen in the way that “parents’ styles of talking about the past are increasingly reflected in their children’s styles of remembering and narrating their own past experiences” (Salmon and Reese, 2016). Similarly, narrative talk as seen in telling stories, also requires more complex sentence structures than talking about the present (Salmon and Reese, 2016). It may seem simple to tell children stories or reminisce about the past, but the benefits of these conversations and interactions can make a wonderful impact on children’s language development.

Hopefully, it’s clear that talking to children and engaging in narrative practices with them is important to their language development, but it’s also important to consider the content of these conversations and narratives. Just as children learn to think and speak in the language of their parents, they also learn to think using the perspectives, values, and beliefs displayed by their parents. A common mistake made by parents and educators is using social essentialist language with children.

Social essentialism is the biased ways people perceive the world by categorizing people (e.g., by race, gender, or ethnicity) with the belief that these categories are natural (Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017). These beliefs claim to hold information about another person based on their categorization such as ‘that person is a boy, therefore he likes to play with cars’. These essentialist beliefs shape and guide people’s everyday lives and identities but are not found in nature. A person’s skills, interests, and abilities cannot be determined based on their genetic makeup or a generalized category constructed by society, language usage, culture, and history.

Rather, a person's skills, interests, and abilities are not limited by the categories that society puts them in.

Children naturally learn new ways to categorize by preschool but do not develop essentialist beliefs about these categorizations unless given relatively strong cues (Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017). These cues often come from social interactions with parents, caregivers, or teachers. To avoid the development of social essentialist beliefs in children, parents should be conscious of the language they use around their children. The language should focus on the individual rather than generic language that makes generalizations about a person from biases and preconceived social categories. For example, instead of saying, 'Look at this girl! Girls like to wear dresses,' which implies that all girls wear dresses, say, 'That girl likes to wear dresses.' By focusing on the individual, children do not learn language that promotes stereotypes and "[do] not expect individuals to do certain behaviors because they are [girls]" (Rhodes & Mandalaywala, 2017). Children who learn essentialist beliefs will also behave according to them as behavior happens in context. If a child is told an essentialist belief such as 'don't talk to the homeless, they're violent', not only will the child perceive homeless people as violent but they won't talk to them. "What the child is asked to do and where the child is asked to do so matters" because it will be reflected in their real-world behaviors (Perone et al., 2021). The language that is used around children matters as it influences not only their beliefs but also their behavior.

Children shouldn't be limited by the categories imposed upon them by society. When children are pressured into conforming to stereotypes about things like gender, it can lead to missed opportunities and limit their ability to express themselves. Gender categories exist in our society, and they cannot be eliminated entirely; however, we should encourage diversity within

these categories. This can come in the form of diverse interests, personalities, and forms of expression. When children are free to explore their interests and express themselves, they are more likely to find self-actualization as adults, leading meaningful and fulfilling lives. It's vital that parents are mindful of the language they use in order to nurture their child's development and support them in their interests.

References

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