



Every Child a Talker

Helping children with speech and language delay: sharing books together.

Children learn to talk by being involved in conversations: with adults and other children. Sharing books with young children can be one of the most effective and enjoyable ways of helping children to learn to talk, especially if we can have a conversation while sharing a book. Why books? Books tell us about what we already know, and help us to understand about new things. Most importantly, they allow us to talk about something together. Sharing a book with a child can be one of the most rewarding experiences, as long as we get it right.

But young children with speech and language delay often find it difficult to make themselves understood, and this can make conversation difficult. Some children avoid talking with adults, and so lose out on the vital practice that they need. Children with speech and language delay often seem to be very active and find it difficult to concentrate, (and particularly with activities that adults want them to concentrate on). They are often described as having delayed *attention control*.

But might it be that their experience of failure to communicate has reduced their confidence? As a result they may focus on what they are good at, and avoid activities that focus on talking. For this reason, sharing books with children with speech and language delay can be a trial: for both the children and the adults!

So if we want to engage children with speech and language delay in sharing books with us, we will need to think carefully about how to make it as interesting as possible. Here are some suggestions for making book sharing successful and enjoyable for everyone. You can find out more about these suggestions by clicking on the links to information on my website.

Working our way to books

For all children, books are often the end of a journey that involves being interested in other people, recognising pictures (usually photos) and spending time with adults who are relaxed about books. Taking photos with children: of things they know about (family, favourite toys and games, nice food, animals, transport, TV programmes) can be a good start. Talking about a child's photo on a wall is often the starting point for looking at books. Two photos clipped together make a book!

We often assume that children will automatically be interested in storybooks. However very young children prefer non-fiction books, with photographs, rather than line drawings or coloured pictures. Some of the most interesting books are not classed as books at all: such as the *Argos* catalogue or comics. Children with language delay may be at the stage where they prefer to look at books with colour photographs, rather than a story. (See [‘sharing books’](#) and [‘Reading, writing, and children’s culture’](#))

Matching the book to the child's interests

This is very important. We need to find out what children like, and find books to match. If our child likes to line up cars, then find a book with lots of cars in, or take photos of his cars, and make a book. *The Big Red Bus* by Judy Hindley and William Benedict is a simple sequence about a traffic jam. I have bought a set of cars and a bus to make our own traffic jam, and this can be very exciting to share together.

Getting the atmosphere right: having a nice space to share books

Sometimes the problem can be that the place where we share books is just not right. It is either too small, or there are so many books and cushions and large cuddly toys, that only the most enthusiastic-about-books child can spend time in there. (See [‘Give your book corner a makeover1’](#) and [‘Give your book corner a makeover 2’](#))

Books don't need to be in a book area. If children like to play a lot outside, then take books outside. If they like to take part in construction role-play outside, then make sure that you have books nearby with pictures of people building, and diggers, cranes etc. (See [‘Developing language through construction play outdoors’](#))

Getting the atmosphere right: really sharing a book

Here we have the most important area to think about. Sometimes it is what the *adults* do that switches the children off. Without realizing it, we can turn sharing a book into a question and answer session, or even reading practice. The first thing to look at is what we mean by *sharing* books. If the adult is holding the book and reading the story page by page until you have finished, that is not sharing a book, but *reading* a book. For most children that is exactly what they like, want and need, but for children who are unsure about books, this can seem like hard work.

Try letting the child choose the book they would like to look at. It may be a non-fiction book. Give them the book to hold, and let them talk about the pictures, and you respond. That is *sharing* a book. (See [‘sharing books’](#))

Dialogic reading or ‘dialogic book talk’ is a way of sharing books with children that can be very helpful in developing their language and understanding of reading. There are some excellent examples of this approach in the Every Child a Talker [‘Guidance for Early language Lead Practitioners, \(second installment\)’](#) (pages 19 to 37)

Rhyming and singing

Finally let's not forget the importance of rhyming and singing together. Children love singing, and nursery rhymes are usually their earliest favourite songs. Children enjoy talking about pictures showing favourite rhymes, and especially if you have a bag of toys to go with them (Puppets by Post have an excellent Nursery Rhymes finger puppet set. Visit www.puppetsbypost.com)
(See [‘Rhyming, singing, reading and spelling’](#))

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