



The Power of Using Everyday Routines to Promote Young Children’s Language and Social Skills

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An enormous amount of learning can take place when children are involved in daily routines such as bathing, feeding, diaper changing and riding in a car – things that parents do with their children every day. These daily events are so important because they provide opportunities for repetitive learning in a natural, enjoyable yet structured way.

What do Children Learn in Routines?

Think of all the things that parents do with their children in any given day. They dress and feed them, bathe them and help them brush their teeth. It is within the context of such daily routines that a young child begins to make sense of his or her world. This involves understanding:

- how their worlds are organized – e.g. after waking up, they get dressed, brush their teeth and then have breakfast
- the words that people say in relation to each routines
- social roles - such as how to start a conversation (initiate) and how to respond appropriately when the other person starts it
- how to participate with others in a conversation (even before a child can talk) as an equal conversational partner

Learning Social Roles through Active Participation

Since there are goals in all routines, it is clear to the child what has to be done. For example, the goal of getting dressed is for the child to end up wearing his shirt, pants, socks and shoes. The goal of riding in a car is to be seated and buckled up for the ride. Each routine consists of a series of small steps, such as opening the car door, climbing into or being put into the seat, sitting on the seat and then being buckled. Some routines have special language that goes along with them - e.g., “Time to get dressed” or “Let’s go for a ride.”

- *Encourage the child to take on a more active role*

In the beginning, the parent does most of the work, such as pulling the t-shirt over the child's head or putting toothpaste on the toothbrush and brushing the child's teeth. However, as the child participates in the routine over and over with his parent, he gains confidence and his role changes. Gradually he does and says more. For example, he may even tell the parent what comes next or ask for what he needs. He may even suggest a routine (i.e. start it) or end it. As the child's active participation grows, so does his independence and self-esteem.

- *The easy way isn't always the better way*

It is often easier and faster for the parent to lead the child through routines. If, however, the parent always directs - e.g., giving the child juice before he asks for it, turning on the water or putting on the child's pants when he can start to learn to do it himself, the child doesn't feel that he has much impact on his world. On the other hand, if the parent waits for the child to initiate, such as letting the child try to turn on the water or squeeze toothpaste onto the toothbrush, the child begins to understand what his role as an initiator can be. This is a very powerful experience in helping a child understand that he can take another person's role or perspective, an important part of effective two-way social interaction.

By experiencing recurring responses to his behaviour – for example, getting the juice after he points to it, the child also learns that there is an appropriate way to ask for his juice. If, however, his parent misses or ignores the child's pointing, the child will seek other ways to get what he wants, perhaps by crying or trying to climb up on the counter to get the juice himself. To learn socially appropriate behaviour, the child must have repeated and successful experiences in structured social activities in which he actively participates.

Learning the Meaning of Words

When a parent takes a cup from the shelf, pours juice into it and brings it closer to the child, both child and parent share a mutual focus or a common interest. If the parent then says, "Here's your juice", she is "mapping" the word "juice" onto the object, allowing the child to begin to attach this word to some aspect of the liquid in the cup. In this brief interaction, the shared activity provides the foundation for understanding.

However, at this point, the child doesn't know whether the word "juice" refers to the cup or the liquid inside the cup or even the act of giving the cup. To learn the specific meaning of the word, the child will need many more experiences of hearing the word "juice" associated with the drink. The more times the child does something with the juice while hearing the word, the clearer the meaning will become. The key to a child's understanding is his motivation to understand, which is heightened in a situation in which he's an active participant.

Turning Routines into Opportunities for Learning

For the kind of learning described above to take place, certain conditions must be present in interactions between the child and his caregivers.

The following guidelines are helpful in building opportunities for participation and learning into routines:

Break routines into a series of small consistent steps so that there's a shared understanding of how the routine works - make sure that you conduct the routine the same way each time, saying the same things at each step to help the child become very familiar with how it works.

Be flexible - young children learn best when you follow their lead. If the child wants to roll on the bed when he's putting on his pyjamas, instead of trying to stop this behaviour, work it into the routine by saying, "First, put on your pyjamas and then you can roll on the bed." If the child sees that there is a reward for following the steps of the routine, he'll be more likely to comply. And just as much learning can take place in a playful game of rolling on the bed as in putting on pyjamas!

Label what the child is interested in at the very moment it seems to be his focus - studies show that the most important aspect of helping children learn the meaning of a word is timing. For example, if the child looks at the pizza and the adult says, "Let me get your cup", what the parent says won't help the child learn the word "pizza", which is what really interests him at that very moment.

Be creative - routines can be made out of anything that a parent and the child do together regularly. Routines can be created around planting or watering plants, changing a bandage, feeding the cat or baking cookies. The best learning opportunities are the ones that are the most interactive and the most fun.

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help all preschool children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills, including those children with or at risk of language delays and those with developmental challenges such as Autism Spectrum Disorder.

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