Welcome to the Fall 2011 edition of The Speech Pathology Group’s family newsletter. “Conversations” addresses common questions and concerns raised by families whose children have communication challenges. This issue features early language development, focusing on communication between infants/toddlers and their caregivers. You will learn activities that can help stimulate your child’s communication development well before he/she may be ready to talk. Two intriguing online videos that highlight how communication and speech first emerge are also shared. For the older children returning to school this fall, we have information on using visual aids to help ease the anxiety and confusion of adjusting to new schedules. Make sure you also check out the different programs and events for all ages offered through SPG this fall!

STIMULATING COMMUNICATION IN INFANTS AND TODDLERS

Foundational skills for language develop well before first words emerge. Here at our SPG clinics, we might see clients as young as 18 months for speech therapy. At times, we provide consultative services to children even younger who have been identified as being “at risk” for speech, language, and learning delays. Parents may very well wonder, “My child is practically a baby! How can I expect her to work on communication when she’s not even ready to talk?” But even infants, from the time they are born, communicate through body movements and sounds. They cry and coo and gurgle and smile, they look and reach and turn away. They’re able to show us when they are uncomfortable or content, interested or hungry. Initially, they do all these things without realizing they are sending us messages. As the important adults in their lives react to and treat their behaviors as meaningful, babies come to realize that they are, in fact, communicating, and they learn to repeat their nonverbal signals for specific purposes. Similarly, when we encourage and interpret gestures and sounds in toddlers who are not yet using words, they ultimately learn that they now have a way to communicate a range of ideas to us. Here are a variety of activities that caregivers can use with infants and toddlers to support their prelinguistic skills, which are essential in paving the way for more sophisticated communication interactions:

To Promote Eye-Contact and Attending to Shared Activities

- Talk face-to-face, so that your eyes are at the same level as your child’s (e.g. squat down).
- Make exaggerated facial expressions, mouth movements, and sounds (e.g., make really tight lips before saying a “b” word, or very round lips when saying “Oh”).
- Over-exaggerate your gestures.
- Make fun sound effects for your actions.
- Use different speaking volumes and pitches (high-low, loud-soft, squeak-growl).
- Add a surprise element to your play that captures your child’s attention (e.g., put a sock on your head, make a stuffed animal sneeze or hiccup).

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To Encourage Nonverbal or Vocal Turn-taking

- Encourage participation in and anticipation of playful, repetitive routines (e.g., raspberries, bounces, songs/rhymes). After repeating your actions and sounds over and over, pause expectantly before performing the desired action or completing the routine to see if your child will make some sort of body movement or vocalize as his/her “turn”.
- Signal to your child that it is his/her turn by waiting expectantly: establish eye-contact, lean in closer, raise your eye-brows, nod encouragingly, and open your lips slightly as if about to say something. Reward/respond to body or hand movements, changes in facial expression or eye-contact, or to vocalizations.
- Make silly sounds.
- Share turn-taking activities: roll a ball back and forth, throw beanbags, do a puzzle, build a block tower, bang on a drum, stomp your feet, put hats on each other, exchange tickles, etc.

To Establish Early Imitation Skills

- Encourage imitation of physical actions (e.g., clap hands, kick feet, tap fingers).
- Encourage imitation of actions with objects (e.g., put hat on head, knock over blocks).
- Encourage imitation of oral movements (e.g., puff cheeks with air, wag tongue), or of non-speech sounds (e.g., sniff, blow raspberries, smack lips).
- Keep in mind that physical/nonverbal imitation will likely happen before your child is ready to imitate sounds/words.
- Follow your child’s lead by imitating an action, facial expression, or sound that he/she starts: if your child sees you copying something silly, he/she will be more likely to repeat it.
- Pair actions with sounds to help your child transition from physical imitation to sound imitation (e.g., “Whoa!” each time you pretend to drop him/her, “Wee!” when going down a slide, “Bam! Bam!” when using a hammer).

To Develop Play Skills

- Play with cause effect toys (e.g., push a button to make something happen).
- Repeat activities and actions over and over.
- Encourage imitating use of objects for their intended purposes (e.g., push car, stir spoon, stack rings, put on hat).
- Show how you can play with the same toy in different ways (e.g., car down ramp, up ramp, fall off ramp, bump another car, get stuck, go fast, go slow, etc.).

EARLY COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT: AMAZING VIDEOS (CHECK THEM OUT!)

Early language acquisition can be fascinating to observe. The two videos described below offer valuable windows into typical—but nonetheless remarkable—communication development in toddlers. Those of us who live or work with children with speech and language delays may also witness these developmental stages and learning processes, although perhaps at a somewhat later age:

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Twin Talk: Not only utterly adorable and fun to watch (again and again!), this video clip (http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_JmA2ClUvUY) also offers a wonderful example of what typically developing “baby babble” can sound like. At 17 months, these youngsters demonstrate how early a variety of speech and social language skills emerge. Note their rising intonation that echoes adults’ use of question inflection, the use of gestures that are paired with their vocalizations, their physical imitation of one another, their short speaking turns that include pauses and attentive listening, and the eye-contact that they maintain during their “vocal volley.” Keep in mind that even more sophisticated “jargon” would involve more varied strings of consonants and vowels (e.g., “da-da-dee-doo-na-ma-duh-buh,” rather than the reduplicated “da-da-da-da-da-da-da” shown in this video). Twins, typically sharing each developmental milestone as intimately as they do, certainly have opportunities to experience unique interactions, and you may find that your child does not engage in such extensive back-and-forth babble. Some people even wonder whether the twin boys are sharing a special “secret language.” In fact, sound play such as this—with a partner and without—is a typical stage of child language development, and is a precursor to communication with words and gestures. If you’re not sure whether your child is “babbling” or “jargoning,” watch this video and you should have a better idea!

Birth of a Word: We don’t expect our children’s first words to sound exactly like ours. Their words are shortened and simplified, their sounds substituted and omitted—sometimes in predictable ways, sometimes in unusual ways that make it more difficult for us to understand what they are saying. Some speech sounds and types of words can be expected to take longer to master than others. Oftentimes we will hear a certain sound in one word, but notice that it is missing within another word. Learning speech sounds is quite an extraordinary feat! You might still be eagerly anticipating your child’s first word. Or, it might be hard to remember how your child sounded when he/she was just learning to say a new word. It might seem to happen overnight, but this video, “Birth of a Word” (http://www.ted.com/talks/deb_roy_the_birth_of_a_word.html), shows us how a child’s journey in linguistic development towards just a single utterance can undergo many refinements before it is reliably recognized as a true word. MIT cognitive scientist Deb Roy, who does research on how children learn language, presents a fascinating, highly elaborate study, condensing 90,000 hours of audio-video material of his son for his first 24 months of life to demonstrate one child’s amazing linguistic evolution.

abba...awaa...wawa...ada...wada...water!

SMOOTHER FALL TRANSITIONS WITH VISUAL AIDS

Schedule changes that inevitably come with the fall are often stressful for parents and children alike. Visual aids that allow your child to anticipate changes in routines may help ease him/her through the unpredictability and possible upheaval that can come with a new school location, a change in teacher, or just the return to a school-year schedule. Visual aids may include:

- **Activity choice boards** that allow your child to select from pictures depicting e.g., playing on swings or digging in sandbox, going to park or taking a walk;
- **Visual schedules** with pictures representing the order of your child’s main activities throughout a particular day (e.g., First school, then music class with Dad, and then a strawberry Jamba Juice), or steps within just one of the day’s routines (e.g., Eat breakfast, get in car, pick up Joey, go to school or, Homework, dinner, TV, bath);
- **Social Stories** with written and visual descriptions of what to expect or how to behave in a particular setting (e.g., “This year I will ride the school bus. The bus might be crowded and loud, but I have to stay in my seat. I can listen to my iPod if I start to feel nervous.”).

Use of visuals such as these prior to and during routines can go a long way in helping not only those children who tend to react with significant emotional distress to change, but also those with comprehension difficulties or expressive deficits that are improved with advance rehearsal of new vocabulary. Parents can use photographs, simple drawings, or printable pictures from the internet to personalize their child’s visual aid. One excellent website, www.dotolearn.com—originally designed for children with learning disabilities or on the autism spectrum, but helpful for any child who benefits from visual support—offers materials and interactive activities for children and adults with special learning needs, including printable picture cards for visual schedules, activity choice boards, and social story templates.
WORKING TOGETHER TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

SPEECH PATHOLOGY GROUP FALL OFFERINGS

SOCIAL COMMUNICATION GROUPS AT SPG: New social language groups are forming now at the Speech Pathology Group. Preschool, elementary school age, and teen social groups help children develop social-pragmatic skills necessary for successful peer interactions. Depending on their age level and areas of need, children are coached by therapists to appropriately join in play or conversation, take turns, listen, ask questions, make comments, initiate topics, stay flexible, and problem solve. Dyads (two children to one therapist) or small groups (limited to 4-6 participants) are available. Please contact the SPG office at 925.945.1474 if you are interested in setting up a consultation for social-pragmatic therapy.

READING & WRITING INTERVENTION AT SPG: Speech Pathology Group speech therapist Shari Krell, MS, CCC-SLP, is a certified Orton-Gillingham reading specialist who offers specialized reading and writing intervention at both our Berkeley and Walnut Creek offices. The Orton-Gillingham Approach is an instructional method intended for individuals with difficulty reading, spelling, and writing. Appropriate for all age levels, it focuses primarily on decoding and encoding strategies and pre-literacy skills. It is a language-based, multisensory approach that uses systematic teaching to aide students in acquiring the necessary language skills to become skilled readers. Please contact our office if you are interested in learning more.

STORY TIME WITH SPG SPEECH THERAPISTS: Join SPG staff for special Story Times at Giggle, a children’s store in Walnut Creek, and at Crackerjacks Kids on Piedmont Avenue in Oakland. We will be reading books aloud for the kids, and teaching their parents techniques to promote early language learning and literacy skills. Story Times at Giggle are held the last Wednesday of each month at 11am; Story Times at Crackerjacks vary, with our next one scheduled for September 13th at 10:30am. For more information, please call Giggle at 925.746.0300 or Crackerjacks Kids at 510.654.8844. Free.

PARENT TRAINING FOR INFANTS WITH SPG: Join SPG speech therapist at Day One Center in Walnut Creek for a parent training on developing language and social skills in infants through play. September 22nd: ages 0-6 months; September 23rd: ages 6-12 months (both at 11:00am). Visit www.dayonecenter.com for more information.

INFORMATIONAL SESSION WITH SPG: SPG presents an informational session on communication development in children ages 1-3 years. Held at the Concord Library during “Toddler Tumble Time” on September 28th (10:00-11:15am). Space is limited; sign up at 925.646.5455.

Please continue to check out SPG’s calendar of ongoing and upcoming events on our website at www.speechpathologygroup.com