Active communication

Using musical instruments, ‘magic markers’, talking puppets and more, Judith Harries shares 12 ideas for developing young children’s language, listening and literacy skills...

LISTENING

MUSICAL GAMES
Sit your children in a circle and give everyone a different musical instrument. Play ‘Pass the sound around’ by asking each child to make a sound in turn on their instrument. Encourage them to listen to the different sounds and watch how they are made. Now try ‘Add your own’. Push the instruments into the circle and invite one child to select one to make a sound. The next child must repeat the first sound and ‘add their own’. The next child must repeat the previous two sounds and ‘add their own’, and so on.

RHYMING STEW
Learn these words to the tune of ‘There was a farmer had a dog’: We’re going to make some rhyming stew, we’re making stew that’s rhyming. Slowly (Quickly), stir the stew x3. Be careful with your timing!

Provide a tray of objects with rhyming names (e.g. cat, bat, hat, etc.). Include some things that don’t rhyme! Invite children to put a rhyming word into a large saucepan to stir with a big wooden spoon. They can choose what speed to stir the stew!

DOGGY, DOGGY
Teach the children the following song using the ‘cuckoo call’ or a falling third: Doggy, doggy, where’s your bone? Someone stole it from your home! Who stole my bone? (Doggy solo) I stole your bone (Thief solo).

The ‘Doggy’ should sit in the middle of the circle, eyes closed. The ‘bone’ is one of a pair of claves and the other clave is passed around to determine the ‘thief’ (whoever’s left holding it at the end!) The thief must ‘steal’ the Doggy’s clave, creep back and sing their line, leaving the Doggy to guess by the sound of their voice who’s to blame.

TALKING

WHICH ANIMAL?
This game helps children develop the ability to ask and answer questions effectively. Show them a selection of plastic animals and then hide them in a fabric bag. Ask one child to covertly remove one animal, and encourage the others to ask questions to identify it. Model effective questions such as “How many legs does it have?” or “What sound does it make?” Remind children to listen to all the questions and answers to gain clues about the animal. Can they work out which animal is missing from the bag?

MAGIC MARKER STORIES
Here’s an activity that will help children to use talk to develop narratives and storylines. Sit in a circle and introduce a ‘magic marker’ to the children. Explain that they can only speak when they are holding the magic marker. Ask the children to retell a story that they are familiar with, either a traditional tale or from a recently enjoyed picture book. Each child can add a bit more to the story while holding the magic marker and then must pass it on to their neighbour.

NURSERY RHYME CHATTER
Sort the children into ‘talk partners’. Choose a popular nursery rhyme and say it together as a group. Invite them to say the rhyme with their partner. Ask simple questions for the children to share answers with their partner such as “Who was in the rhyme?” or “Where did they go?” Invite partners to talk to their group about their answers. Make a collection of items/pictures related to nursery rhymes and put them in a box. Pull out an object and ask children to talk to their partner about which rhyme it’s from.

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BEYOND LANGUAGE & LITERACY

Literacy skills are central to children’s development both at school and at home, and learning to communicate effectively is a key life skill. These activities should provide practitioners with some new ideas for each area of literacy. However, many of these activities also involve cross-curricular learning opportunities incorporating each of the Early Learning Goals. There are many times when children need to play cooperatively and take turns during these activities and games which are key parts of PSED – for example, gaining confidence in speaking to the group is evident in all of the Listening and Talking activities, while others will support physical development, expressive arts skills and children’s understanding of the world.

Judith Harries is an author and teacher of music and drama, with experience of working with children aged nine months to 11 years.

READING

PUPPET RHymes

Use this activity to practise reading CVC words and recognising rhymes. Introduce a puppet to the children. Explain that he loves rhyming words but sometimes gets them wrong. Ask the puppet to share a rhyming sentence such as ‘The cat sat on the ball.’ Can the children tell you what the puppet has done? Create a list of rhyming words (e.g. mat, bat, fat, pat, hat) from which children can choose an option that makes sense. Discuss how they can find a rhyming word that fits. It needs to use the same mouth shape and the same end sound. Point out the changing initial sound.

THE SHARK GAME

This game develops children’s ability to read graphemes, VC and CVC words. Create a large domed shark’s mouth out of cardboard and line it with sharp pointy teeth cut out of white paper. Cut out lots of small fish shapes and start by writing graphemes on them. Ask children to find specific graphemes and feed them to the shark. Extend to reading VC and CVC words. Invite children to play this game with a partner and ask them to read different sounds and words to feed the shark.

SHAKE OF THE DAY

This fun game helps children to recognise and read different CVC words. Find a box or tray with a clear plastic lid such as one from a chocolate or toy box. Write letters from sets 1–5 in Letters and Sounds: Phase 2 onto the faces of three wooden cubes or bricks: First brick – s, p, c, h, r, b; second brick – a, e, i, o, u, a; third brick – t, p, d, m, r, g. Place the bricks in the tray, pop on the lid and invite children to shake the tray and see if they can create a CVC word to read.

TIP: Have regular ‘Share a story’ mornings where parents are invited to stay with their children for the first 15 minutes of a session to read a story.

WRITING

MAGIC FINGER MARKS

When encouraging early mark making and developing writing skills it’s important for children to have a high level of sensory feedback. Try providing them with shallow sand trays in which to use their magic fingers to create shapes, patterns and letters. Mix cornflour with water to create a gloopy paste. Put this in a shallow tray for children to push and mix. Can they write in the sticky paste? Cut seasonal shapes such as large flowers out of shiny white paper or laminated card, and let children use finger paint to write shapes, patterns and letters.

WRITING FRAMES

Use simple writing frames to encourage children to develop writing short sentences. Draw a grid using two boxes, one headed ‘can’ and the other ‘can’t’. Choose an animal to talk about with the children such as a dog, cat or horse. What things can the children think of that each of these animals can or can’t do? Ask them to write their chosen animal at the top of the frame and add words to it. Sentences should emerge such as ‘Dogs can bark’, ‘Cats can’t drive’ or ‘Horses can jump’.

THE QUEEN’S BIRTHDAY

Look at different examples of acrostic poems. Help the children to write their own using their names. Explain that this year the Queen will be celebrating her 90th birthday, twice! She has two birthdays – her actual birthday on April 21st and her official birthday, which will be celebrated over two weekends: 12–15 May and 10–12 June. Try thinking of words that begin with the letters from the word ‘queen’. Invite children to write their own acrostic poems and send the best one to her majesty.

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