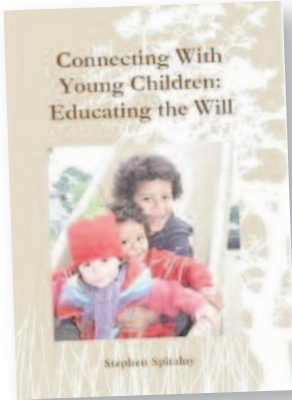


Speaking with the Young Child Through the Kindergarten Years

By Stephen Spitalny. This article originally appeared in "Renewal". It is now incorporated in Mr. Spitalny's book, Connecting with the Young Child, available via his website, The World of the Young Child.

As parents and teachers of young children, we need to be as conscious as possible in our speech and language with our children. Particularly with children through kindergarten age, the content and quality of our speech affects physical and intellectual development. What we say and how we say it can be either a support to healthy development or a hindrance.



The most important developmental task for the young child is the growth of her physical body. A newborn baby has immature, "unfinished" internal organs. Its

liver, heart, kidneys and brain must be properly formed in the first seven years. Breathing and pulse rates do not usually have consistent rhythms until a child is six or seven years old. The eyes muscles that track and focus take eight years to mature. The brain is not capable of mature, rational "thought" until after a child is eleven or twelve years old, when the brain's frontal lobes are able to take charge of the cortex. If the child's forces of growth and formation are free to their task without hindrance, the child can build a solid foundation for lifelong physical health.

The child's development, in terms of mental awareness, reflects a gradual awakening. The newborn infant is barely conscious. She is asleep to self-consciousness and awareness of the world. She and the world are a unity. The duality of self and other, of self and the world, only slowly appears. In the preschool and kindergarten years, the child lives in a dream consciousness, is not awake, as in adult. This awakening takes place as growth forces are gradually freed from their task of building up the physical body. These growth forces are the same forces used for mental picture-making and memory. Calling a child out of dream

consciousness prematurely can adversely affect physical development. Of course, children can be pushed into an early intellectual awakening, but to allow them to come to self-consciousness at their own pace is a gift for their future.

As parents and teachers, we can support the healthy development of the young child through our own speech. The more clearly we speak, the better we enunciate, the more clearly will the child, imitating us, learn to speak. Thoughtfully choosing our words creates a positive example for the child's own language. We do the child an injustice if we change our speech to suit how the child speaks. The child does not need to hear "baby talk" from an adult. The child needs the example of what we really are – adults. Clear speech is the foundation for clear thinking.

Young children may ask questions! Answering them with, "Well...I wonder," allows the child to tell us. When we are called to answer why and how and so on, we need to be creative and imaginative, and above all, honest and truthful, in our responses. Long explanations with intellectual, scientific detail are not effective, and are even harmful to young children. The question "Why is it raining?" is well answered by, "The clouds are full of water," or, "It makes the plants glad. They were thirsty." We need to nourish their imaginative dream consciousness, not reason them to wakefulness. We don't need to explain the difference between round square, up and down, or teal or blue. They will learn to differentiate in their own time, out of their developmental readiness and their experiences of the world.

Young children of today are asked far too many questions. They are called on to think and to remember. What is happening to the child who has been asked a question to which she has no immediate answer, and who is "bearing down," gritting her mental teeth to pull out an answer? "...Ummm..." If we really are observing, it is painful to see.

"What happened in kindergarten today? Tell me everything you did." This question and request are not appropriate for a child. Rather, we should let the child talk about their experiences in her own time, out of the capacity of her own budding memory. It is better for the child if we do not

drag and pull information out! That the child does not remember means that during the day she has been allowed to live in her imaginative world. A traumatic experience is most likely to be remembered and talked about; it is kind of awakening. For most adults, in fact, the earliest memory that can be recalled is of an injury or emotional hurt.

Also, young children are offered far too many choices today. There is a movement to empower the young children. This is counter to healthy development. There is enough stress already in children's lives in the modern world. Young children need the security and certainty of adult guidance. They are not ready for major decisions. A certain amount of choice is healthy and important. To empower a young child to be our equal is not. That we would be empowering an irrational being. We must assume responsibility for guiding young children and being their authority. David Elkind in his excellent book, *The Hurried Child*, writes in depth on this and other themes.

Several years ago, a mother of a child in my kindergarten would usher her child into the room every day. She would stay a few minutes to see that her child was settled and then say, "I'm going now, O.K.?" She left the child free to say "No," and when the child did so, the mother was frustrated. Another, better approach is to say declaratively, "I'm going now." The statements "It's bedtime now," or "Button your sweater and put on your hat," demonstrate this same approach. In certain areas we must be the authority, to guide our children in a healthy way, gently but firmly.

When unacceptable behavior occurs and there is a need for discipline, we need to speak to the children in appropriate ways. Scolding, threatening, and moralizing are unsuitable and ineffectual, as are lecturing and reasoning. "Don't, don't, don't..." is too often what the children hear. We can instead, present a positive alternative, in simple words, accompanied by actions.

Rather than, "Don't run inside," we might say, "We walk inside, we run outside." Instead of "Don't slam the door," we can say in a quiet voice, "We close the door gently," while demonstrating just that. "Hands are for work and play and taking care of others," accompanied by a stroking of the hands which have done the hitting is a favorite technique of mine to deal with a child hitting another. If two children are squabbling over a toy and aren't able to resolve their dispute themselves, we can make a decision and say, "Sally may have a turn now, and Mary will have a turn next." Important to keep in mind is that young children are not naughty or bad. They are adventurers and

explorers searching for their way in the physical and social world. Our job is to guide and lead them in their path with our actions and words, as a living example.

In our modern world with trends toward child empowerment and toward "getting in touch with our feelings," we often hear an adult asking a young child: How do you think you would feel if...?" or "Do you know how he feels?" Young children are called to "get in touch" with their feelings and the feelings of others. They are, however not ready to intellectualize, to bring into consciousness their feelings. Certainly they experience feelings, but they will start to label them when they are ready. We need to acknowledge the child's feelings, but we can avoid probing and intellectualizing in the feeling realm until a later, more appropriate stage of mental and emotional development.

Reasoning, probing, and intellectualizing disconnect children from their doing. The child is awakened from a unity with her surroundings and activities into a self-consciousness and different kind of awareness of the world. All too often we see precocious children, children who have been "pushed" awake, who look pale and wan. They are drained of the precious forces of growth, and this can have adverse effects in later years.

In *Education and Modern Life*, Rudolf Steiner writes, "Although it is highly necessary in view of the nature of our modern civilization that a man should be fully awake in later life, the child must be allowed to remain as long as possible in the peaceful, dreamlike condition of pictorial imagination in which his early years are passed. For if we allow his organism to grow strong in this non-intellectuality needed in the world today."

We are in a position of great responsibility. One of our tasks as parents and teachers of young children is to be truly conscious of our speech and language, so that the children are allowed to awaken at their own pace in a healthy way. Early childhood is very precious and passes very quickly. We should cherish these special years and not rush them by.