



Contemplating Rhinoceros for Dinner

Jennifer Friedman, March 2004

Of course, being a speech-language pathologist I am biased in my beliefs, but I feel very strongly that language is the most crucial key to learning. Early on, language is a goal. Hearing your child produce that first word, make funny grammatical mistakes as she is figuring out those “rules”, and watching your child fumble with sounds while he tries to produce new long words, are all steps in the process of acquiring language. After the initial stages of learning language, a transformation begins and language becomes predominantly the means rather than the end. Soon children are using and relying on language to learn.

While learning language, parents should focus on enriching their children’s exposure to language. Parents should talk to and listen to their children. Newborns have already begun the process of learning language and by providing concrete language input, parents have a direct impact on their children’s language learning. Simplifying language while speaking to a newborn helps her make direct connections between the sounds she is hearing and the objects or actions she is seeing. “Dog. Look at the big dog! Dog.”, “You’re clapping. Clap, clap, clap.”, “Big smile. What a big smile!”, “More? Do you want more? More.” are concrete and functional explanations for what the child is experiencing in that moment.

Before a child even begins to use his first words, he is already learning through language. Children understand what we say before they can even say anything themselves. So when a baby points to a car, and we say “car!” we teach her the language. We continue with “Look how fast the car is going! Oop, the car stopped. It’s a red light” to unknowingly teach the nonverbal child concepts related to movement, rules, and colors. Throughout their childhoods we continue to teach our children language but more importantly we teach them through language.

As a vegetarian, we began by giving Jack the vocabulary to explain his situation. He knows the words for things he does not eat (fish, beef, chicken, etc.). We taught him the language he needs to know and now we can dive into the topics related to being a vegetarian. We used concrete examples to help him understand that he does not eat meat but others do (always using Grandpa Mickey as the model carnivore!).

Critical to teaching through language is always listening to our children to find out what they think of the world, rather than making assumptions about what they know or about what they want to learn. The other night at bath time, Jack pretended to eat a rhinoceros. When asked if he eats rhinoceros he responded “no” and then look puzzled for a minute before asking, “Grandpa Mickey eats rhinoceros?” I suggested to Jack that we go directly to the source to seek a truthful answer, and so we called his grandfather. From the hoots of laughter on the other end of the telephone and the response that followed, Jack learned that while rhinoceros is an animal that certainly *could* be eaten, it is not particularly relevant to non-vegetarians as a source of protein in this country.

As our children move through the preschool years they are learning more and more through language. As parents we can continue to teach them language, we can use language to teach them about their world, and we can listen to their words and sentences to find out what they understand and what they want to learn. They may even teach us, considering possibilities that we would never have thought of on our own.