

## **Thoughts on Speaking with the Young Child (Through the Kindergarten Years)**

By Stephen Spitalny

For parents and teachers of young children, it is important to be as conscious as possible in our speech and language with the children. Particularly with children through kindergarten age, the content and quality of our speech affects their physical and intellectual development.

The most important developmental task for the young child is the growth of her physical body. A new born baby has immature, “unfinished” internal organs- liver, heart, kidneys, brain, etc., which must be properly formed in the first seven years. Breathing and pulse rates do not usually establish consistent rhythms until a child is six or seven years old. The eye 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 frontal lobes are begin to be able to take charge of the cortex. To allow the child’s forces of growth and formation to do their task without hindrance allows them to build a solid foundation for physical health throughout their life.

Looking at child development in terms of mental awareness, we see a gradual awakening. The newborn is barely conscious; we say 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 me and the world, only slowly appears. In the preschool and kindergarten years, the child lives in a sort of dream consciousness, not awake, as is an adult. This gradual awakening directly relates to the growth forces gradually being made available from their task of upbuilding the body. These growth forces are the very same forces which are used for mental picture-making and memory. Calling a child out of dream consciousness prematurely has adverse effects on their 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. “What can be accomplished with forces available only at a later time should never be crammed into an earlier stage, unless one is prepared to damage the physical organism” (Rudolf Steiner - *Soul Economy and Waldorf Education*)

As parents and teachers we can support the healthy development of the young child through our own speech. The clearer we speak, the better we enunciate, then will the child learn to speak more clearly through imitation. 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, such as “baby talk.” The child needs the example of what we really are: adults. Clear speech is the foundation for clear thinking.

Young children ask many questions! Sometimes it is that they have something to tell us. Answering with “Well...I wonder,” allows them to tell us. When we are called on 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. “Why is it raining?” “The clouds are full of water. It makes the plants glad. They were thirsty.” We need to nourish

their imaginative dream consciousness, not reason them into intellectual wakefulness. We don't need to explain the differences between round and square, up and down, or teal and 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 can have no immediate answer, and who is "bearing down," gritting her mental teeth, to pull out an answer? "...Umm..." If we really are observing, it is painful to see.

"What happened in kindergarten today? Tell me everything you did." Rather, we can let the child talk about her experiences in her own time, out of the capacity of her own budding memory. It is healthier for the child if we do not drag and pull information out! Not remembering all the details of her day says the child has been allowed to live in her imaginative world. Traumatic experiences are the ones most likely to be talked about, as they are awakening. For most adults, in fact, the earliest memory that can be recalled is of an injury or emotional hurt.

In the same vein, young children are offered far too many choices today. There is a movement to empower the young child. 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 yet 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 would be empowering an irrational being. We must assume responsibility for guiding young children and being their authority. David Elkind, in his book, *The Hurried Child*, speaks in depth to this theme, among others. (Highly recommended!)

Several years ago, a mother of a kindergarten child ushered her child into the room. She stayed a few minutes to see that her child was settled and then said, "I'm going now, O.K.?" She left the child free to say no, which frustrated the mother. Another approach is "I'm going now." Similarly, "It's bedtime now," or "Button your sweater and put on your hat," demonstrates this theme. In certain areas we must be the authority, to guide our children in a healthy way.

How we speak to the children in appropriate ways in the realm of discipline, when unacceptable behavior occurs? Scolding, threatening, and moralizing all are unsuitable and don't work anyway, as with 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 walk inside, we run outside." Instead of "Don't slam the door," "We close the door gently," in a quiet voice while demonstrating. "Hands are for work and play and taking care of others," while gently stroking the hands that have hit, is a favorite of mine. If a child uses a stick for poking another child, for instance, we can say, "This stick needs a rest now." If two children are squabbling over a toy and aren't able to resolve it themselves, we 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 world. Our job is to guide and lead them on their path with our actions and words, as a living example.

In our modern world with trends toward child empowerment and “getting in touch with our feelings,” we often hear this type of interaction between adult and young child: “How do you think you would feel...? Or “Do you know how he feels?” Young children are called on to “get in touch” with their feelings and the feelings of others. They are not yet ready to intellectualize, to bring to consciousness their feelings. Certainly they experience feelings, but they will come 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 (and 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 a 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.

“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-intellectual way, he will rightly develop in later life the intellectuality needed in the world today.” (Rudolf Steiner- Education and Modern Life)

We are in a position of great responsibility. One of our tasks as parents and teachers of young children is to be fully 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 so precious and passes so quickly; we should cherish these special years and not rush them by.

### **ENNOBLING COMMUNICATION IN KINDERGARTEN – by Stephen Spitalny**

*"The most important thing is to establish an education through which human beings learn once again how to live with one another."*

This thought from Rudolf Steiner inspires Waldorf education and is of extra significance in kindergarten, which is such a formative time. During the first seven years or so of life the child's main tasks are to come to terms with physical reality, to develop the organs of their own physical body, and to learn to relate socially.

The main learning paradigm for the young child is imitation, so how the adults around them manage conflict is particularly influential. I think of the work of developing communication skills and resolving conflicts in a healthy way as a life-long learning. It is important for the children to experience our working on ourselves in these areas. Also important is how the children are guided toward resolving their own conflicts. I'll share an example from kindergarten:

Jack was playing with a wooden boat. Jill approached Jack and took the boat and went to another part of the room to play. Jack cried. There are many possible approaches for a teacher to take. "Jill! Give that back to Jack and say you are sorry." Or; "Jill. How do you think Jack feels? What would you feel like if he did that to you?" Or; to Jill "It is Jack's turn now and you may have a turn next." Or, to Jill "Jack is sad. Can you do something that will help him?"

The approach I take combines the last two responses and is based on the particular children and the specific situation. We cannot expect the young child to be able to understand how someone else is feeling, when she is just beginning to be able to label her own feelings. Also, to simply require an apology does not allow Jill to help resolve the situation herself. Lastly, it is important not to blame one of the children or to make them "wrong." I wouldn't say, "You hurt him." Or "You should feel ashamed of yourself." Rather, "He is hurt."

Through active developing of compassion for the one hurt, out of imitation the children can develop communication tools for their communication and conflicts are resolved more easily. It really is the early part of a kindergarten year where I have much conflict management to attend to. As the year progresses and communication skill in the children improves, there is less and less need to intervene.