

The Importance Of The Hand In Language Development

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Why does your tongue stick out when you are trying to thread a needle?

For most of us, when we are doing a job with our hands that requires fine motor control, such as threading a needle, our tongues will stick out involuntarily as we concentrate on the task at hand. It is as if our brain is trying to make our tongue make a word out of what we are doing!

Linguists realize that the hand, language and the brain are connected in many and mysterious ways. The work of the hand builds neural pathways in the brain. Research has shown that children remember the name of an object better if they see and touch the object, than if they had only seen it.

We know that children from birth to six are in a sensitive or critical period of language development. This is the time in human development when we acquire language almost effortlessly. At this age, no one needs to teach us to talk.

Language development in all languages, even American Sign Language, follows predictable patterns of acquisition. We can expect the first word from a baby around twelve months.

Around age two, we'll see a child "explode" into language. The child will know hundreds of nouns along with prepositions, verbs and adjectives.

Around two-and-a-half, the child is able to express him or herself with proper grammar, using all parts of speech, and conjugation of the verb.

By age four-and-a-half, a child can speak in complex sentences with mostly correct grammar and syntax.

Research shows that those people who acquire a second language before the age of seven will have speech, grammar and syntax skills as though they were a native speaker, and do so effortlessly. After the age of seven, it requires more time, practice and conscious effort to acquire a second language and speak like a native.

How does the hand help early language acquisition?

Being aware of the hands' connection to the brain and language development, and knowing that the sensitive period for language acquisition ends by age seven, you need to keep your children's hands busy with appropriate and enriching activities.

Many children spend too much time in front of the television, video games, or computer, involved in activities that require minimal hand involvement.

As parents you might say, "These activities on the television and computer aren't all bad. There are educational games."

And you would be right.

But developmentally, you would be wasting precious time for your children, because they could be involved in activities that better serve their potential as human beings.

Some families have eliminated television, computer and video games for their children under the age of six.

A more realistic goal may be to limit total machine time to two hours or less per day, even on the weekends.

But what will you do to keep those little hands busy?

Set up an activity center for your children with activities that will encourage their hand and brain development. Set up shelves with six to ten activities attractively presented in baskets or on trays. You can rotate these activities out as you feel necessary. Have your child choose an activity, show them how to use it correctly, neatly and safely, then show them how to put it away properly when they have completed the activity.

If you have children under the age of three, some of the following activities may present a choking hazard.

Two excellent books for more activities are *Montessori Play and Learn* by Leslie Britton and *Montessori Read and Write* by Lynne Lawrence.

Activity Center Suggestions for Three to Six-Year-Olds

- Transfer activity: sort a collection of buttons by color, shape or size into an egg carton or muffin tin.
- Drawing/Writing: Cup with colored pencils, markers, or crayons and half sheets of paper.
- Beading Lesson: Long shoestring, large wooden beads or empty spools of thread.
- Puzzles: Start with knobbed wooden puzzles and work up to 100-piece puzzles
- Wooden Building Blocks: Keep in basket with placemat or small rug to define workspace.
- Duplo blocks: Keep in small basket with placemat to help define building spot.
- Have a child-sized broom and dustpan available for cleaning activities.

Keep your child's hands busy with appropriate work.

Enrich the language environment by reading out loud and singing.

Then watch your child's verbal skills blossom.