
The Role of Oral Language in Early Childhood

— Ursula Ramos

Oral language and storytelling play an important role in the Waldorf early childhood classroom. They also are key to a child's healthy development. Oral language and storytelling are conveyed through rhymes, verses, song, and stories. They aid child development in framing our activities, bringing imagination and pictures, being a source of comfort, and being a catalyst for movement. In addition, oral language and storytelling are an antidote to the sensory deprivation caused by media use.

From the very beginning of life, a young child's senses can be fed by oral language. Lullabies, soothing words, and nursery rhymes benefit the child's development. The very young child is not looking for explanations or facts, yet she benefits from the meaning behind these soothing or humorous forms of speech. Even before young children can speak or comprehend language, they understand the feelings behind the words and also the feelings behind the sounds of the words. We can envelop them with safety, gentleness, and sympathy through our words. Similarly, young children can be carried along by the rhythm and melody of songs and nursery rhymes. They can enjoy the sounds of the rhymes so much that they look forward to hearing them and eventually ask for them, without yet understanding their meaning.

Very young children retain an intimate connection with the spirit world, traveling freely back and forth between the gateway of heaven and earth. During the early years they are taking in the world from sense perceptions that are a remembrance of the knowledge they brought with them from the spiritual world. They are taking in information from everything around them, especially from the natural world. As they get a bit older, they move towards understanding and relishing fairy tales and other oral language. This is where children move from existing only in direct experience with their surroundings, to being able to absorb stories about other things. At this stage of development, they can picture imaginary worlds and become immersed in stories about imaginary surroundings and people. They are drawn to and get the most out of pictorial language, understanding the meaning through larger archetypal images and

other picture language, rather than the language of reason and logic.

Our speaking to children throughout the day supports their development. Children find comfort in repetition. They enjoy reading the same books, going on the same walk, visiting grandma on the same day each week. Being carried along with rhythm and repetition gives children a chance to explore within safe, well-understood boundaries. Of course, children may see hints of repetition from their past lives or from the spiritual world, but they are also finding their way into their current earthly lives. So much of modern life is not rhythmical and offers little repetition. Our modern times do not make intrinsic sense to children. In the classroom, we may begin our days by saying the nursery rhyme "Rub a Dub Dub" as we wash the children's hands. We use the same transitional songs for clean up or for getting on the rope "train" to go outside. The same blessing is said each day before snack. Anytime a child can be met with simple repetition, they can relax into the real work of childhood.

In my new nursery class, I chose to use all the transitional verses from my parent-child classes, because most of the children came through my parent-child classes. I knew that hearing these familiar verses in a new classroom, away from their parents for the first time, would help carry them through this major transition. I wanted to surround them with as much familiarity as possible. Were the transitions smooth these first two weeks? Absolutely not. It was a lot like herding cats as these little ones tried to find their way to cleaning the room or joining the circle. But several recognized the cues and sat on the circle rug or ran over to have the Dusty Child rub their cheek at clean up time. Other children instinctively sang the songs with me, songs that many had heard for two years already. Even if they weren't sure what to do in those first few days, they were surrounded by familiar songs and verses that helped them identify transitions. All this repetition carries the children through their day, allowing for a feeling of safety and a space for exploration.

We carry the same circle for several weeks, until the children can fully live into the songs and verses. We also carry the same story for a couple of weeks, using much the same words each time. This allows the children to enter into the story. It gives the children time to digest what they are hearing. With time, the children can understand the pictures in the language and comprehend the meaning within the song, verse, or story. This then allows for the excitement, anticipation, joy, and participation that comes from this familiarity.

For the first two weeks, I have been carrying a welcome circle as well as “Mary Had a Little Lamb” as the puppet play. The welcome circle includes singing good morning and naming each child. I chose to do this so that they could learn their friends’ names. You can see the pleasure on their faces when they remember the name of the child that I am going to sing about next and can join with me. One little girl tries to beat me by saying the child’s name before me, so pleased with herself that she knows all her friends’ names already. I am also doing the Wilma Ellerseik verse “Before Dawn.” They were quite attentive the first day or so, not yet knowing the words. However, now that they know they know the animals, words, and some gestures, their enthusiasm is palpable. I have also seen them repeat some sounds and gestures during play time. I have given them time to digest this verse and it has given them something to take into their imaginative play. The same can be said of my puppet play. The children ask if they will “see Mary.” She is a marker in their day and something to look forward to at the end of their busy morning.

Oral language is an antidote to media. Everywhere we can see the proliferation of screen time. I recently observed a family in a tourist town. The three children, ages seven to twelve, were all walking down the street looking at their phones while shielding them with one hand from the sun. It is not uncommon to see children on their tablets or parent’s phones when at the grocery store, or watching a video in the car. Then there is the media within the home itself. What this media means is hours each day of noncommunication between child and adults. These

are all missed opportunities to notice and discuss the new, the different, or the mundane. It means missed opportunities to process what has happened in their day. These are the times where parents can forge bonds with their children through conversations big and small. Families are not giving time for these conversations to happen; thus many children are growing up unable to initiate or hold conversations, unable to meet another human. It also blocks the adults’ ability to impart knowledge or experience to their child. Instead, children are having virtual experiences with their media of choice.

Another downside to media use is the lack of movement. Speech has been described by Karl König as “movement come to rest.” The nature of modern media is to keep children engaged with quick-moving images that keep the child in a state of “fight or flight.” This means children spend hours sitting still at an age when their prime mode of learning is through movement and engagement with the environment. This emphasis on visual stimuli stunts the use of other senses. It prevents them from engaging in physical activities that promote gross and fine motor skills, in turn affecting brain development and leaving them less than ready for formal school learning, and, frankly, life. The lack of speech is related to poor sensory development because speech deficits are so closely related to overall motor and sensory development. For example, more than one hundred muscles are involved in producing speech. Children who are deprived of opportunities for speech are deprived of opportunities to properly develop these muscles.

In fact, most of the foundational senses that Rudolf Steiner described rely on movement and interaction to develop. The tactile system, or sense of touch, is a foundational sense that relies on interaction with other humans and with the environment. Through the sense of touch, children begin to understand where they end and others begin. An underdeveloped sense of touch manifests in poor motor planning, and this extends to speech production. Another foundational sense is the sense of self movement, or the proprioceptive system. Lack

of movement opportunities mean a less developed sense of self movement, which means a lack of spatial awareness. This too manifests itself in poor motor planning and lack of speech development. The sense of balance, or the vestibular system, can properly be developed only through movement. An improperly developed vestibular system means children often feel literally off balance, or tend to bump into other children or ruin play. Both of these conditions have social consequences for the child. Underdeveloped vestibular systems have been correlated with speech deficits as well.

As we can see, media use can place children in a sense-deprived state, denying them the physical setting needed to succeed in school and in life. We are taking away their ability, in some cases, to become upright, to speak, and to learn to think. These are the very things that make us human. The last foundational sense is the sense of life. The sense of life informs us of our well-being. It is related to sleep, nutrition, and rhythm. It helps us be in tune with ourselves. Media aims to keep us uninterested in ourselves or how we feel. Media addiction can cause complete disinterest in all the things that the sense of life supports.

Young children also learn through imitation. Children are wired to look to the adults around them to learn about life. They do this by imitating mother washing dishes or father cooking dinner. They sweep their playhouses, as they have watched their parents sweep the house. Through this the children are not only imitating movements, they are learning about the tasks of life. Because we live in a pushbutton and swipe-type of world, there is less meaningful work for children to imitate. In the Waldorf classroom, teachers actively engage in work that children can imitate, such as ironing, grinding grain, and churning butter. These are all things they may never see done at home. In order for children to develop their will and understand their place in the world, we must provide examples of real work that they can take part in. What are the consequences to children who do not have examples of real work in their lives? What are the consequences of children not having human examples worthy of imitation, instead having only images on a screen? We know that children can begin to talk and walk like animated characters on the screen, but what does it do to the development

of their will and of their soul? These experiments are being played out in real time and children are the guinea pigs.

Media also does not call on children to use their own imaginations or creativity. Images from media crowd out the child's own ideas. Children who engage in media use are not only deprived of interaction with humans, which can help spark an idea or feed creativity, they are also deprived of interaction with their environment. Engaging with one's environment helps children make connections, discover new interests, and work collaboratively. Engaging in the environment often means more time in the natural world, which is known to help humans digest their lives and provide a sense of calm. All these things are missed out on when children take part in too much media.

We can see that a life full of rich oral language is needed for the healthy development of a child. There is certainly an assault on oral language in our society. Most children suffer from some lack of language in our lives. Thankfully, the emphasis that is placed on oral language through verses, nursery rhymes, songs, and stories in Waldorf early childhood classrooms can help support language development in children. Hopefully, through educating the parents of these children, they can enrich their use of language in their homes as well. ♦

Resources:

- Karl König, *The First Three Years of the Child: Walking, Speaking, Thinking* (Edinburgh, United Kingdom: Floris Books 2004)

Ursula Ramos began teaching in the nursery classroom at the Tuscon Waldorf School in 2000. She was part of the pioneer Lifeways training in Wisconsin. After taking time off to start a family, she returned to Tuscon Waldorf School, teaching parent-child classes for six years. In 2017, she returned to the nursery. She is a certified Simplicity Parenting group leader and completed the Sunbridge Institute early childhood teacher training in 2018. She is grateful to have all three of her children attending Tuscon Waldorf School in first, fourth, and eighth grades.