TIP SHEET 1

PELICAN TALK

The advice given on this tip sheet is by Lucia Smith, Speech Pathologist.

It is based on experience from her clinical work along with her work consulting with teachers and parents.

It is difficult to address all children's communication styles in a single tip sheet.

If you are concerned about your child's speech or language development, please see a speech pathologist.

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HELPING MY TODDLER WITH TALKING
10 THINGS TO DO

1. HEARING Children learn to speak by hearing speech around them so obviously trouble with hearing can negatively affect a child's speech development. Children who get intermittent ear infections can have even *more* difficulty than a child with a mild hearing loss that remains consistent. When hearing is up and down (due to ear infections), children find it difficult to learn from the speech they are hearing - sometimes the input is clear and sometimes muffled. Remember that ear infections can go quite unnoticed. Many a parent has shown me how their child responds to even a whisper, but after their ears are checked, the results show scarring of the eardrum indicating years of ear infections. So, watch for tell-tale signs: tugging or rubbing ears, irritability, frequent runny or blocked nose, and of course unclear speech or language delay. Visit your GP if you are concerned about ear infections.

2. YOUR SPEECH MODEL The speech directed at your child is what they learn from, so make sure your speech model is a good one! Your speech should be slower than when speaking to an adult. You should repeat main words or ideas and you should make your voice interesting to listen to (use lots of ups and downs in pitch and variations in loudness). You should also keep your sentences short, even if your child can *understand* long ones. If you want your child to learn how to put words together, they need to be shown how to build up their speech in small steps. For example, if your child is only using two words together, they will need to hear lots and lots of examples of you saying short three or four word sentences. Child: "Where ball?…. "
You: "Where is that ball?. The red ball?… The ball's under the table …."

3. ATTENTION TO SPEECH Young children have trouble focusing their attention. As we grow, we become very good at filtering out unimportant distractions. This may be the sight of a big truck going past, or the sound of the TV in the background. Children who have speech and language delay need time when their focus is directed to your speech. Help children do this by removing clutter, particularly in areas where you wish to spend time focusing on speaking and playing together. For example, remove toys or things that may distract a child when you are trying to share a book with them and if possible, remove yourself to a quiet room away from other siblings. Auditory distraction (background noise) is also a big inhibitor of speech development. Avoid having the TV or radio on for extended periods of time.

4. RESPONDING TO YOUR CHILD **How you respond to your child's communication attempt is very important.** That's why I have dedicated a whole page to it! Communication is anything that involves conveying a message to you. For example, your child may look at something and then at you. Or they may see something, look at you and launch into a string of babble. Or they may see something, reach for it, and then start to cry… All of these are examples of, or can be viewed as, communication attempts. The way you respond to these communication attempts is vital!

Firstly, you should become very good at watching your child. Do not jump in too quickly. Are you really sure you know what they are trying to communicate? Sometimes as adults, we assume we know what our child wants and they are not given a chance to refine their messages. Waiting can be difficult, but it is important. Show your child that you are listening and watching and you are prepared to wait for them to show you or tell you what they want. After waiting, comment on what you think they are trying to tell you. Simply give them the word or words that they would say *if they could.* For example, "A bird… you saw a bird". Or "Teddy…you want your teddy". Or "Sad…. You're sad." If you really don't know what they want, perhaps some more waiting and watching carefully will give you the answer. Squat down to your child's level so they know that you are trying to follow their communication attempt.

Repeat and build is a great strategy for all children. When your child says something, repeat what they have said (using correct pronunciation) and then build it into a little phrase with an extra one or two words. For example, if your child said "It's hot" when they see the kettle boiling, you could say "It *is* hot… it's a hot kettle … we don't touch the hot kettle."

Try NOT to respond with a question.

If a child points to a bird and says "bu", try not to say "What is it?" They will not learn from this. Instead say "*Bird*… that's right , you see a *bird*".

Or if your child is reaching for a teddy and screaming, don't say "What do you want?" It's obvious what the child wants and they would probably say the word if they could. Instead, try saying "Teddy…" and then wait… Your child might try and say the word. If they don't, take the teddy, get down to their level, say "Teddy… you want the teddy", then give it to them.

(*If you know your child can say "teddy", you might say gently "Use your talking" and then wait. Next, if your child still screams say "Teddy…" and so on, as above. Certain children may lose their ability to say certain words when they are stressed or tired).

Try not to respond with an immediate negative response. If your child points to a cow and says "horsey", it's easy to say "No… that's a cow", but it's better to say: "Horsey? That's *like* a horsey… that's a cow… A cow has horns …look… He says Mooooo." This way your child learns so much more.

Or imagine, your child comes up to you with a DVD, starts grizzling and pushing it into your hand, but you can't watch a DVD because it's bedtime. It may be tempting to say "No, put it back " … or "No DVD, it's bedtime." It's better to say "DVD? You want the DVD on… but no DVD now… It's bedtime." This way your child learns a lot more language (even if they don't get to watch that DVD!)

Never say "Say _____" If you were learning a new word and attempted to say it, you would not appreciate being told to say it again. This can kill communication attempts. For example, if your child came up and said "Doe in tar" , it is not so good to say " Not 'doe in tar', say 'GO IN CAR'." It is much better to acknowledge what your child was attempting to say, by repeating the words correctly back to your child "Go in the car? Yes, it's nearly time to go in the car." This way your child hears the correct pronunciation. (Remember that some errors are normal in a child's speech at certain ages. Some sounds are too difficult for young children, so they may not be able to say them even if you tell them to. If your child is difficult to understand by unfamiliar listeners by three years of age, please contact a speech pathologist).

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BEWARE THE PASSIVE COMMUNICATOR !

When children have delayed speech, it is very easy to get into the habit of giving them what you know they want. Such children are at risk of becoming very passive. The *need* to communicate becomes less because everything is given to them or everything is decided for them.

Waiting (as mentioned before) is a great strategy. Sometimes you may have to wait until it feels uncomfortably long, but as long as your child is still engaged, they will appreciate this time.

Another strategy, is to act a little stupid… For example, your child may be reaching for a cup on the bench. You know they want a drink. Instead of saying "Drink" immediately, try taking the cup and something that is nearby on the bench (eg. a book). Put them either side of your mouth and get down to your child's level. Ask: "Drink ?…. or … book? " Wait and your child may try and say the word… or again, they may reach for the cup. At this point, you can say "Drink… you want the drink." These choice questions are great as your child hears two options, one of which is usually the answer. For children who are already using a few words together, you can ask choice questions that consist of a few words. Eg. "Do you want…. A drink of juice? …. Or …A drink of milk?" (Rather than just asking "Do you want a drink of…. Milk …. Or…. Juice?") By doing this, your child may respond with a few words as an answer.

5. FOLLOW YOUR CHILD'S INTERESTS

As a speech pathologist, I sometimes set up an activity for a child, only to find they arrive and are not at all interested in my game. It can be disappointing! Instead they might spot the chalkboard in the corner and want to draw – or they may hear a truck outside the window and want to go and have a look. This is partly to do with removing distractions before a session so a child can focus on a task at hand. The other side to it, however, is that a child will learn more if you follow *their* interest, pick up on what *they are trying to communicate* about and model language around this.

Another example is trying to read a book to a child. You may wish to point out and name the animals in the book, but your child points to the sun on the page and then at a tiny cloud in the sky. Your child will stay at the book longer and will learn more, if you actually watch what they are looking at and respond to it. Of course there are times when they need to try and focus on something else, but acknowledging what they are communicating about is always important.

Another part of following your child's interests, is about letting them show you what they wish to do in play, rather than *you* directing *them*. For example, you may be playing with cars and your child keeps opening the car doors and shutting them. Instead of saying: "Drive your car over here," you could simply take another car and drive it near the child saying "Driving…my car is driving…" If your child is interested, they might copy. You could say "I wonder… Can your car drive with me? You're shutting the doors… now let's drive together."

Finally, young children usually talk and think about the here and now, so you should follow this as well. Getting your child to talk about what happened yesterday or to "Tell Nanny where we are going tomorrow…" is often too abstract for a young child. Young children don't often initiate this sort of talk, so follow your child's interests and keep the chat mainly about things that are present.

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6. ROUTINE Children love routine. When a daily routine is relatively consistent, children become familiar with speech that is part of that routine. For some children, it is useful, writing out the routine of the day and then writing a number of phrases that can be used within each routine. For example, you might start the day with breakfast, so whenever you pour the cereal in the bowl you might say: "In the bowl…" then " Pour the milk." After breakfast, you might get your child dressed, so you could have several consistent phrases you could use at this time as well. You might say "Where's that foot gone?" before you put each sock on. Try and keep the intonation and the actions consistent as well. You might hold the sock up and put your hands on your hips every time you say "Where's that foot gone?"
In time, you can start to drop off the end word of the phrases as you do the action. When pouring out the cereal, you might say "In the…."and then wait. Your child might say "bowl…" or even "in the bowl". When you are dressing, hold up the sock and put your hands on your hips . Say "Where's…." and wait. Your child might fill in the gaps.
Reading familiar books together and playing games, songs and finger rhymes are all examples of routines that can help your child become familiar with language.

7. LEARNING AS YOU ARE DOING Much language is learnt through experience. Many children will learn to say words along with an action, so pairing what you are doing with speech is very important. You might be rolling play-dough, so as you do it alongside your child, add in some speech about what your child is doing "Rolling… rolling… rolling the play-dough…cut it up… cut, cut, cut … into little bits". Remember again, that turning off background noise and removing other distractions is important. Have moments of silence when you listen for what your child might be trying to say. Repeat these attempts and build on them. Art, craft, building, sand play etc. are all brilliant activities for teaching not only object names, but words such as "in, behind, sticky, dry, more, long" and so on. All sorts of words are important for a child to learn if they are going to build sentences.

8. USING SIGN LANGUAGE I love sign language and I have had so much success with its use over the years. The technique I use is "keyword sign" which involves speaking whole sentences as you sign the main words. Sign language works for a number of reasons. It is an easier motor task than speech for most children, so if speech is slow in developing it can act as a wonderful bridge. As mentioned before, words are often better learnt when paired with actions, so in a way, learning a word with a sign can make the spoken word "pop out" more easily for a child.
I sometimes introduce a whole new phrase using sign language. For example, if a child can request something using a single word (eg. "bubbles") , I might sign and say to them "**Bubbles**…. You **want bubbles**". (I would sign the words in bold). At the same time, I would model lots of signing this phrase in my own speech (Eg. **I want** a **drink** now). Signing can also work well to help children build communication because you take their hands and help them do signs, whereas you cannot very easily shape their mouths into speaking! Useful phrases to learn in sign language are:
My/your turn, I want _____, **Where**'s _____ ? **More** _____, We've **finished** _____.

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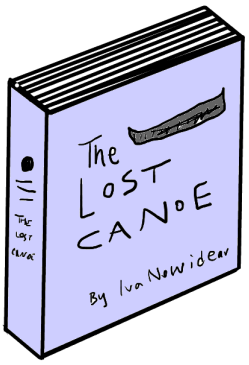
9. BOOKS AND SONGS As in all things, follow what your child enjoys and is interested in. If your child loves books about trucks, then you can use these to teach a lot of language. You may have to look at the same book over and over again, so you can try and extend the language you model after your child has mastered the basics. When sharing books, don't feel you need to read the words of the book. Follow what your child points to and what they are trying to talk about. Once again, avoid questions and testing. (Eg. What's this? What colour's that? Where's the truck?)

There are some books which are fantastic because they contain sentences that are short and have lots of repetition (like The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle).



Songs (and rhymes), particularly action songs are wonderful for teaching your child to speak. Sing songs and say rhymes <u>slowly</u> as this gives your child a chance to join in. Many children's music CDs, although sounding great, are far too fast to allow children to sing along.

My favourite songs for children are Five Fat Sausages, Row Row Row Your Boat, Heads and Shoulders and Five Little Frogs. They teach so much wonderful language and you can adapt them to teach even more.

10. TELEVISION AND DVDs You may hope that your child will learn language from programs on television or from DVDs. Children's TV shows and DVDs are full of colour and movement and are very attractive to children. They grab a child's attention and this can be mistaken for the child understanding the language presented to them. The speed, length and complexity of the speech on many of these shows are not appropriate for young children, particularly those with language delay. Some of the latest research is in fact suggesting that watching TV sets up poor attention habits in children who adapt to a fast-paced stimuli that is not reflective of real-life situations. Another negative side of watching TV and DVDs, is that they require no interaction. A child can watch and be totally passive. The TV doesn't slow its speech down or repeat a message if the child has not understood. In the early years, the vital years for speech and language development, activities that promote experimenting, interaction and communication between two people are vital. Avoid more than half an hour of TV or DVDs a day.

If you really want to have something on the TV that your child will enjoy watching, try taping yourself playing or carrying out a familiar game or activity with your child. (Kids love watching themselves!) I have had much success showing children tapes of themselves playing with their parent. Hearing the language used within a familiar activity, as they watch the tape over and over again can really help with the learning of the words and phrases that are part of the play. For example, you could tape a play-dough routine while saying simple words such as "Rolling… rolling…rolling the play-dough… There's the knife… cutting, cutting the play-dough." Later when you carry out this activity again, try and use similar words that you used on the tape. You'll be surprised how well it works!

If you have any questions or feedback regarding the tips given above, please email me at lucia@pelicantalk.com

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