Fact sheet 1.7 Links between cognition and language

Learning aim D2 Aspects of language development

As you will see throughout this unit, many areas of development are intertwined or linked together. This unit's focus is on language development but it is linked to cognition as thought precedes language. In the early years before children start to produce speech at around 12 to 15 months, much of their language is based on inner thought as they explore their environments and are submersed by the sounds and sights around them.

One of the key features of children's cognitive development is the way that they can use language to support higher level thinking. Vygotsky and Bruner suggest that through adults using language with children in ways that help them to make connections, children's understanding can become more sophisticated. This is one reason why early years settings encourage adults to interact with children during activities. The style of interaction is important and it is good practice for adults to use sustained shared thinking in situations where adults and children talk together. This helps children to develop new knowledge as they make connections between past and new experiences.

The development of language also helps children to control their behaviours and actions. While two-year-olds are very impulsive, because their language has not yet developed, older children can use their language to think through the consequences of their actions and to guide themselves; we often hear young children 'talk aloud' as they attempt to use language. This links to Vygotsky's observation that language can be social, but also 'inner', and that it is our inner language that is our 'thinking' voice. Interestingly, Vygotsky noted that it was not until children reached six or seven years old that they were able to keep their 'inner speech' to themselves.

In some early years settings, children from three or four years old are encouraged at the end of sessions to talk about what they have done, discovered and learned. This works well in small groups when children's language is fairly fluent. Being able to explain and report what they have been doing is empowering for children, and helps them to use words to clarify their thoughts and ideas. Adults can help children do this by allowing them to take their time, using the odd prompt and helping children to make connections.

Early years settings encourage children to represent their thoughts in more abstract ways as they develop, for instance, drawings and writing. While many children use mark making to record their thoughts and ideas, most will not be able to master this as a recording technique until they are at least seven years old.
Practitioners in early years settings should encourage language through providing a rich learning environment with children, ensuring activities and resources are appropriate for the age range and are stimulating. You will find that the layouts of settings each offer children opportunities to explore, think and learn, and express language. Adults are important in promoting language and supporting the development by introducing children to new words through individual and group interactions, through reading books, singing songs and rhymes.

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