

BabySmart Interview 3-22 with Carolyn Estepa (November 2022)

Carolyn Estepa was the guest for BabySmart #11. BabyRead's Janice Garcia and Kathy Whitmire interviewed her in late November 2022. Carolyn is a speech pathologist with over 40 years of experience in the field beginning with public schools, HeadStart, in the hospital/home care/long term care environments, and in private practice. She has worked with patients from as young as three to 90+ years old.

This BabySmart segment focuses on building vocabulary in young children and the importance of having a rich vocabulary for success in school and beyond.

Janice began the interview by asking about the importance of a good vocabulary. Carolyn said a good vocabulary is the building block of everything else. Without one, a child won't understand what's going on in the world; they may be able to read phonetically but without the vocabulary they will lack the comprehension needed to understand what they are reading. Kathy Whitmire added research has shown that children of poverty frequently have a significantly less diverse vocabulary. Carolyn agreed but said it shouldn't be looked at as poverty vs. well-to-do children but rather as "impoverished language." Lower socioeconomic families can help their children develop a broader vocabulary by having many books in the home from libraries and free book sources (such as BabyRead and the Dolly Parton Imagination Library). She said libraries are an outstanding source and recommended checking out five books a week. Letting the child pick the books, reading them over and over again, and starting well before the child reaches kindergarten are keys to success.

Carolyn said birth through 5-years old is extremely important for developing vocabulary. She highlighted several essential pre-literacy skills gained through pre-kindergarten reading from physical books -- not iPads or tablets! These include reading left-to-right, how to flip pages, and that pictures are related to the words and vocabulary. She said research indicates many children that start kindergarten¹ without the essential pre-literacy skills they need have a very difficult time catching up with their peers by second grade. This often leads to a poor self-image, seeing themselves as failures, frustration, and not speaking up in class.

Carolyn recounted some of her experiences of being a speech therapist in a public school system with a high percentage of low-income families. She said she had to focus on language development as opposed to the commonly held notions of addressing lisps or stuttering. She met every student in their classroom weekly to expose them to vocabulary with call out sessions for specific children as required. She used storytelling, sign language and rhyming songs to teach the children how to construct whole sentences both verbally and by signing. Her school system had transition classes between kindergarten and 1st grade as well as between 1st and 2nd grade. Language development and vocabulary were stressed during her weekly meetings with those classes too. Carolyn stressed that the children were bright and were like sponges when it came to learning new things – poor vocabulary (and lack of essential pre-literacy skills) were primarily a result of lack of opportunity. She reiterated books were essential for both classroom and call out students.

¹ Kindergarten attendance is not mandatory in South Carolina.

Carolyn said starting with board books early even while nursing is an important building block because the baby is developing brain neuron connections (synapses) at a phenomenal rate – even if they don't comprehend, the brain is still absorbing and growing. She recommended continuing with easy readers and stressed establishing a routine of sitting and reading. She recounted how reading a book while nursing helped keep her 4-year old's attention because they had previously bonded and had established a quiet time reading routine.

She said nursery rhymes are important for babies, toddlers and even 5-year-olds because kids like rhyming and rhythm and use them to memorize things. She used the Jack and Jill nursery rhyme to talk about synonyms (fetch means pick up and a pail is a bucket). Once they see a picture it puts the new words in context and is a means of expanding vocabulary.

When asked about what age to stop reading to children, Carolyn said "never." It's a quiet bonding time that benefits parent and child. Even if they are reading on their own, reading aloud with a parent provides an intonation association to a word that otherwise isn't understood in context and can help make the book come alive.

Kathy asked Carolyn to explain the difference between receptive and expressive language. Carolyn said receptive language is how much language you understand; expressive language is how much you can express or say. She used the example of "rearranging a cupboard" where the word is not initially understood when used by the parent but becomes a receptive one once the activity is seen in context and then used later by the child to describe an activity they are performing. Describing everyday activities with a rich vocabulary helps expand receptive language followed by a richer expressive language.

Janice asked her about language-rich environments. Carolyn replied that a language-rich environment implies using a lot of different activities to build language. These include not only directive language for toddlers (e.g., sit down, eat your food, put on your shoes), which are important, but also reading about things they aren't exposed to in everyday life – a safari, exotic animals and their habitat, and history, for example. This will help contribute to lifelong learning. Kathy discussed experience-based learning and making your own books about things you just did (e.g., going through a corn maze), recording things you have done gives them stronger meaning. Janice and Carolyn agreed. Kathy said it can also be useful in developing routines such as getting ready for bed. Carolyn said reading needs to be a daily activity. She also stressed the importance of reading comprehension when doing math problems.

Janice concluded by thanking the host Riley Johnson, Kathy Whitmire and Carolyn Estepa. Riley said listeners could contact him at City Hall for information on how to contact BabyRead or any of the participants.