

Teaching Children Language through Conversation

Gail Hartman

A How to Teach Cued Speech Share-Fair Presentation

One person who made a big difference in the way I taught special education was James McDonald of the Nisonger Center in Columbus, Ohio. He took a look at the way parents and children with handicaps communicated and saw lots of things that he thought needed work. Carolyn talked about the things that parents should do when they are interacting with their children. McDonald looked at what parents actually were doing. When we think a child has a problem, we think we need to sit down and teach him. We change the natural way a child would acquire language.

I've seen parents work long hours with their child on noun flashcards. The result was the child had a great noun vocabulary, but didn't have any idea of what communication is, how to ask a question, or all the things that make up language. It was difficult to control this child's behavior using language.

I worked with another parent whose child was very active and the mom was feeling frustrated and her son was feeling frustrated because she kept trying to sit him down to talk to him. He wouldn't watch.

What Dr. McDonald recommends is to concentrate on having a conversation with children. If we think about what a conversation is and what we like about conversation that will help us with children acquiring language. In a conversation you take turns. One person says something, and then the other person says something. If you take too many turns or if you take too long of a turn the other person isn't going to want to stay in the conversation for very long. Learning how to take turns and matching your language to the child's level of language are important.

Linda Balderson mentioned stretching a child's language – that's another thing to consider in conversations with a child. If he's using one word responses, you might want to model two word responses – you are stretching their language without making them try to jump too high.

An important skill for the adult is learning to wait for a response – to be silent and expect the child to communicate. Give the child a chance to learn how to participate in the conversation.

- **Be animated.** Carolyn talked about that. Keep the child in the conversation for longer and longer turns. Take turns controlling the topic of conversation and take turns initiating the conversation.
- **Be aware of the child's motivation.** The more you do something and the better you get at it, the more you are motivated to continue. You just keep getting better and better. Think about ways to motivate the child and to make the interaction pleasant so that he will want to continue interactions.
- Since Cued Speech is about literacy, I like to **encourage parents to read to their children as soon as possible.** You don't sit down and read a book straight through with a young child. You sit down and have a conversation about it. You might want to start out with books that have a single topic – like this board book, ***What Do Babies Do***. One of my favorite books is ***Blue Hat, Green Hat*** by Sandra Boynton. It's silly. It is about putting clothes on wrong body parts and there is a lot of repetition. You say "oops" every time the turkey puts the sock on his head or the shoe on his hand, etc. You move up to books that tell a little story and show cause and effect. The ultimate goal is to be able to read longer picture books that are going to expand the child's knowledge of the world.
- Another wonderful book that I use when I'm teaching Cued Speech is ***Yo, Yes***, by Chris Raschkin. It needs to be read with a lot of expression, which is the way we want people to learn to cue. Even people who have had just an hour or two of instruction in Cued Speech are able to imitate the cues as we read the book together.

Q: How do you have a child sit in your lap to read a book, cue, access the cueing, and have that snuggling time that you have with hearing children?

Gail Hartman: What I did was to have Christine sit on my lap facing me and I read the book upside down. Sometimes I would sit a little to the side of her on the floor.

Sometimes I would have her sitting in a high chair. An important thing was to help her learn to look at the book, then at me, and then back to the book. A hearing child would be looking at the book while the adult reads out loud. With a child who is deaf there is an extra step involved.

Comment: You can also hold the kid on one side of your lap and the book on the other side and use the child's face to cue on. There are three parts to this reading together thing that are important. One is the words in the book. One is the snuggling. The last part is the sharing of what you're looking at. I don't think that you have to have all three every time. So sometimes you can just be looking at the pictures and sharing the moment. You can mouth the words and if the kid is stable – not going to fall over, you can cue. You can also cue on the object. They won't get the whole message, but they'll get that you're following the words and looking at the pictures and sharing time with them.

Comment: Another way to do it is if the child is old enough or big enough is to have them hold the book and turn the pages while they're on your lap and then you can cue.

Comment: One thing we used to do is to sit on a bed to read and then they could lean against a pillow sitting against the wall or use one of those pillows that people call a husband pillow with the arms and the back. You can also sit on the floor and use that for the child so they're leaning against something soft - it might not be you. Then you can read upside down.

Comment: The other thing you can do is read opposite a mirror so they can look in the mirror and see you cueing.

Comment: I read with my son sitting in my lap facing a mirror. But to tell you the truth, I didn't get it done as much as I would have liked. My son, being a boy, I reckon, he wasn't going to sit as much as I wanted. Instead of the husband pillow, you could use the husband. Sometimes we did mom and dad and the kid; we would alternate. One of us would hold the kid, while the other one cued the book. That way they were in the arms of a parent.

Comment: I have another way that you might adapt it. My son is a Navy officer and before he goes on a cruise, we videotape him reading books to the kids. You could do that and cue the books to the kids. My grandchildren loved having their daddy read to them, even when he was chasing international enemies.

Comment: Most of the people in our house were using ASL. So usually reading is a two or three-part process. Look at the book, look at the story in the air, and then look at the book again if you want to. I like that technique. One other tool I use when I do cue a story – often it's something they already know. So I'll cue the three bears, for example, but put a lot of emphasis on facial expression, action, etc. It's a real 3-D story with some words attached.

Comment: I don't think I sat down and worried about how I was going to hold him or do something like that. But surely, he can't watch you and watch you move your finger along the page at the same time. There has to be some accommodation for that loss of hearing. You have to be aware of that and do something to adjust the situation.

Gail Hartman: Children like to have the same book read over and over and so that's a real advantage. What I found was that it was a good way to work on auditory skills. After Christine knew the story very well, she didn't pay as much attention to my cueing because she could pick it up through audition.