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Information Sheet 66

The power of using everyday routines to promote young children's language and social skills

By Fern Sussman, *More Than Words*® Program Director, The Hanen Centre

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For more information on Hanen Programs® and Hanen resources for parents, go to www.hanen.org.

An enormous amount of learning can take place when children are involved in daily routines such as bathing, feeding, diaper changing and riding in a car – things that parents do with their children everyday. These daily events are so important because they provide opportunities for repetitive learning in a natural, enjoyable yet structured way.

What do children learn in routines?

Think of all the things that parents do with their children in any given day. They dress and feed them, bathe them and help them brush their teeth. It is within the context of such daily routines that a young child begins to make sense of his or her world. This involves understanding:

- how their worlds are organised – e.g. after waking up, they get dressed, brush their teeth and then have breakfast

- the words that people say in relation to each routine
- social roles – such as how to start a conversation (initiate) and how to respond appropriately when the other person starts it
- how to participate with others in a conversation (even before a child can talk) as an equal conversational partner

Learning social roles through active participation

Since there are goals in all routines, it is clear to the child what has to be done. For example, the goal of getting dressed is for the child to end up wearing his shirt, pants, socks and shoes. The goal of riding in a car is to be seated and buckled up for the ride. Each routine consists of a series of small steps, such as opening the car door, climbing into or being put into the seat, sitting on the seat and then being buckled. Some routines have special language that goes along with them – e.g., "Time to get dressed" or "Let's go for a ride".

- **Encourage the child to take on a more active role**

In the beginning, the parent does most of the work, such as pulling the t-shirt over the child's head or putting toothpaste on the toothbrush and brushing the child's teeth. However, as the child participates in the routine over and over with his parent, he gains confidence and his role changes. Gradually he does and says more. For example, he may even tell the parent what comes next or ask for what he needs. He may even suggest a routine (i.e. start it) or end it. As the child's active participation grows, so does his independence and self-esteem.

- **The easy way isn't always the better way**

It is often easier and faster for the parent to lead the child through routines. If, however, the parent always directs – e.g., giving the child juice before he asks for it, turning on the water or putting on the child's pants when he can start to learn

About us

Learning Links is a charity and non-profit children's learning organisation formed in 1972 by parents and professionals to help children with disabilities and learning support needs.

Our vision is of a community where all children and families have equal access to learning opportunities and quality support.

Our services

Children under 6

- Early childhood intervention for babies, toddlers and preschoolers with a disability or developmental delay.
- Assisting children with disabilities to transition to school.
- Speech therapy, occupational therapy and physiotherapy.
- Mobile toy library service.
- An inclusive preschool.
- FREE story time sessions at Fairfield Library.

Children attending school

- Specialist assessments to determine your child's educational needs.
- Reading and maths support for children who are falling behind at school.
- Speech therapy and occupational therapy.
- Social skills and anxiety management groups.
- Transition to school groups.
- Counselling.

Parents, carers and families

- Case management services.
- Support to families who have just received a diagnosis of a disability for their child.
- Programs to help parents support their child's communication.
- A range of programs to develop parenting skills.
- Support groups for carers of children with a disability, developmental delay or chronic medical condition (MyTime).
- FREE program for parents living in Cabramatta on how to tutor children of preschool age (HIPPPY).

Workshops

Learning Links also delivers workshops for parents, carers and professionals working with children on a range of topic areas including ADHD, autism, behaviour, child development, children's learning, children's wellbeing, communication, counselling and fine motor skills.

Learning Links has services at various locations around Sydney. We also offer some services to children in country NSW, the ACT, and some programs Australia-wide and in New Zealand. A complete list of locations and contact numbers is on the back page.

Learning Links

Head Office

10 Railway Parade
Penshurst NSW 2222
Tel: (02) 8568 8200
Fax: (02) 9580 4788

Email: mail@learninglinks.org.au
Website: www.learninglinks.org.au

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to do it himself, the child doesn't feel that he has much impact on his world. On the other hand, if the parent waits for the child to initiate, such as letting the child try to turn on the water or squeeze toothpaste onto the toothbrush, the child begins to understand what his role as an initiator can be. This is a very powerful experience in helping a child understand that he can take another person's role or perspective, an important part of effective two-way social interaction.

By experiencing recurring responses to his behaviour – for example, getting the juice after he points to it, the child also learns that there is an appropriate way to ask for his juice. If, however, his parent misses or ignores the child's pointing, the child will seek other ways to get what he wants, perhaps by crying or trying to climb up on the counter to get the juice himself. To learn socially appropriate behaviour, the child must have repeated and successful experiences in structured social activities in which he actively participates.

Learning the meaning of words

When a parent takes a cup from the shelf, pours juice into it and brings it closer to the child, both child and parent share a mutual focus or a common interest. If the parent then says, "Here's your juice", she is "mapping" the word "juice" onto the object, allowing the child to begin to attach this word to some aspect of the liquid in the cup. In this brief interaction, the shared activity provides the foundation for understanding.

However, at this point, the child doesn't know whether the word "juice" refers to the cup or the liquid inside the cup or even the act of giving the cup. To learn the specific meaning of the word, the child will need many more experiences of hearing the word "juice" associated with the drink. The more times the child does something with the juice while hearing the word, the clearer the meaning will become. The key to a child's understanding is his motivation to understand, which is heightened in a situation in which he's an active participant.

Turning routines into opportunities for learning

To turn routines into opportunities for learning, certain conditions must be present in interactions between the child and his caregivers.

The following guidelines are helpful in building opportunities for participation and learning into routines:

Break routines into a series of small consistent steps so that there's a shared understanding of how the routine works – make sure that you conduct the routine the same way each time, saying the same things at each step to help the child become very familiar with how it works.

Be flexible – young children learn best when you follow their lead. If the child wants to roll on the bed when he's putting on his pyjamas, instead of trying to stop this behaviour, work it into the routine by saying, "First, put on your pyjamas and then you can roll on the bed." If the child sees that there is a reward for following the steps of the routine, he'll be more likely to comply. And just as much learning can take place in a playful game of rolling on the bed as in putting on pyjamas!

Label what the child is interested in at the very moment it seems to be his focus – studies show that the most important aspect of helping children learn the meaning of a word is timing. For example, if the child looks at the pizza and the adult says, "Let me get your cup", what the parent says won't help the child learn the word "pizza", which is what really interests him at that very moment.

Be creative – routines can be made out of anything that a parent and the child do together regularly. Routines can be created around planting or watering plants, changing a bandage, feeding the cat or baking cookies. The best learning opportunities are the ones that are the most interactive and the most fun.

For children with developmental challenges, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, routines that are carried out the same way can be a source of comfort and predictability in a confusing world. The Hanen Centre's More than Words® guidebook and companion DVD show parents how they can make the most of routines in order to foster their child's communication development. To learn more about how these resources may be able to help you, visit <http://www.hanen.org/MTWresources>



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Head Office

10 Railway Parade
Penshurst NSW 2222
Telephone: (02) 8568 8200
Facsimile: (02) 9580 4788
Email: mail@learninglinks.org.au

Mount Pritchard

Level 1, 46B Reservoir Road
Mt Pritchard NSW 2170
Telephone: (02) 9426 4300
Facsimile: (02) 9601 0058
Email: mtpritchard@learninglinks.org.au

Peakhurst

12-14 Pindari Road
Peakhurst NSW 2210
Telephone: (02) 8525 8222
Facsimile: (02) 9584 2054
Email: peakhurst@learninglinks.org.au

Maroubra

3rd Floor, Bowen Library
669-673 Anzac Parade
Maroubra Junction NSW 2035
Telephone: (02) 9349 4963
Facsimile: (02) 9349 7193
Email: maroubra@learninglinks.org.au

Early Education and Care

SL, 201 Elizabeth Street
Sydney NSW 2000
Telephone: (02) 9261 8655
Facsimile: (02) 9283 0605
Email: earlyeducationandcare@learninglinks.org.au

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