

Positive self-talk; an integral part of early childhood development

By Sharon Penchina & Dr. Stuart Hoffman

How soon does a child begin to learn? It is a recognized fact *that while still in the womb* our brains were learning speech patterns and laying the groundwork for language acquisition. Additional studies by nursing professors, psychologists and obstetricians state that prior to birth, the brain is being set up to learn language.

As caregivers, parents, and facilitators of health and wellness the influence of our communication with 0-6 year olds has far reaching affects. And, since children primarily use the right hemisphere of their brains up until age 6, they are quite receptive to what they are told.

The capacity to learn starts very early on. Dynamic learning begins in the womb. Sensory input such as sound, taste, and feelings; touch all play an active roll in teaching the fetus about the world around it.

For much of this century, most psychologists accepted the traditional thesis that a newborn's mind is a blank slate on which the record of experience is gradually impressed. It was further thought that language is an obvious prerequisite for abstract thought and that, in its absence; a baby could not have knowledge. Since babies are born with a limited repertoire of behaviors and spend most of their early months asleep, they certainly appear passive and unknowing. Until recently, there was no obvious way for them to demonstrate otherwise.

Armed with new methodologies, psychologists began to accumulate a substantial body of data about the remarkable abilities that young children possess that stands in stark contrast to the older emphases on what they lacked. It is now known that very young children are competent, active agents of their own conceptual development.

Non-nutritive sucking is a way to use a physical capability that even the youngest infants possess. In one experiment, the researchers (Kalnins and Bruner, 1973) showed 5-12 week-old infants a silent color film and gave the infants a pacifier to suck, the nipple, of which, was connected to a pressure switch that controlled the projector lens. The infants quickly learned to suck at a given rate to bring the movie into focus, showing not only that they were capable of and interested in learning how to control their own sensory environment, but also that they preferred a clear image to a blurry one.

New Signs of Intelligent Life in the Womb:

- Just like adults, the baby has REM (Rapid Eye Movement) or dream sleep
- The baby can taste it's mothers meals & picks up cultural food tastes
- The baby can distinguish between the voice of mom and another person
- The baby is disturbed when the mom speaks in foreign (to her) languages!

- Awake or asleep, the baby moves 50 times (or more) each hour!
- The baby is calmed by hearing familiar stories rather than new ones
- The baby has the capacity to learn and remember

The roots of human behavior begin to develop early; just weeks after conception. It is known that well before a woman typically finds out she is pregnant, her embryo's brain has already begun to bulge.

Developmental Stages:

- By 5 weeks, the baby has a cerebral cortex (the base of the brain)
- By 9 weeks, it can bend, hiccup, and react to loud sounds
- At 10 weeks, the baby can move its arms, open its jaw, stretch and "breathes" amniotic fluid in and out
- Before the 3rd month is over, it yawns, sucks, swallows, feels and smells
- By 3 1/2 months, the baby's taste buds look like an adults
- By 6 months, the baby can hear
- At 8 months, the baby sleep 90-95% of the day
- Toward the end of the pregnancy, the baby can see

The fetus uses the cells of his developing body to gain information from the world around him which is transmitted to his right brain hemisphere. With this in mind, we gain a broader understanding of our ability to communicate with and take a positive active role in the unborn child's life.

Young Children are highly receptive:

Young children are highly suggestible and tend to mimic what they hear or see. For the first six years of their lives the right hemisphere of their brains are quite active. This is the part of the mind that is responsible for spatial and creative thinking.

If you've ever had the pleasure of watching young children learn something new you'll immediately be impressed with the fervor in which they carefully scrutinize the outer world. Like a sponge, they immediately absorb information and implement the newly found knowledge almost immediately. After a series of repeated demonstrations and instructions, followed by their own experience, they become masters of new behavior.

When it comes to learning language skills, it's important to consider that children are listening long before they begin to utter their first words

From the moment a child is born, the baby begins to learn how to communicate. They progresses from simply crying and cooing, to speaking in phrases, and eventually to making short sentences as it moves into toddler hood. Babies develop solid language skills through talking, singing, playing, and reading together. Rhymes, songs, and poems all are wonderful ways to help promote your child's awareness of sounds.

Developing language skills:

- Toddlers who hear lots of lively, interesting talk are likely to develop a rich vocabulary
- Toddlers can understand words they hear but may not be able to describe what they see or do.
- Don't assume toddlers aren't listening when they are playing.
- Long before they start to speak toddlers learn the rules of grammar through listening

What you say directly and indirectly to your child, as well as what they hear from others through verbal communication and all other forms of media will have an influence on them.

Whether your child is just learning to utter a few words or is speaking most *or all* of the time, helping them to develop a positive internal dialog is one of the most important factors in building a foundation of positive self-esteem and self-image early on.

Emotional barriers or resistance to learning are at a minimum during the formative years of a child's life. This characteristic allows positive statements to be integrated with greater ease and acceptance.

A study by P.C. Burnett in the *Journal of Rational and Emotive and Cognitive Behavior Therapy* concludes that in young children, the presence or absence of positive self-talk is strongly related to mental well-being. Parents should teach and encourage children to use positive self-talk as part of their personal self-development. Well adjusted children are likely to result from such an endeavor.

Let's take a look at how the behavior patterns, habits and beliefs are formed and retained in the mind in order to understand the profound implications of positive self-talk.

Anytime a statement is spoken to or by us, "You are so lovable" or "I am lovable!" *and repeated many times over* the subconscious mind accepts the information in its computer bank. Like a familiar song or like learning the alphabet, we need a place to store information and recall it as needed. The conscious mind would be on overload if it had to retain every experience and thought we ever had. *The sub-conscious mind is also the part of the mind that is responsible for directing the body's functions.*

Unlike the more developed mind of the adult, children are quite receptive to accepting what they are told and therefore far more impressionable. Acceptance of either positive statements or negative statements about themselves has a profound impact.

The ideas, concepts and statements they make about themselves or the world around them become part of their internal belief system and become the driving force behind

many of their behaviors patterns and habits. Such as, in the case of a child that has always been told “*You are stupid and can’t do anything right*” and has difficulty throughout their lives, resulting in procrastination and low self-esteem and an inability to accomplish their goals. The internal voice of doom and gloom is still ever present even when the perpetrator is gone. It’s the old aphorism, “Garbage in, garbage out.”

Positive Affirmations to teach your child:

- I am lovable
- I love learning new things
- I am creative
- I am unique
- I sleep well at night
- I eat healthy foods
- I share my toys
- I love meeting new friends

Affirmations *positive self-affirming statements* serve as an important SELF-EMPOWERMENT tool for children and one that can be utilized throughout their lives. Children learn to feel good about their own special qualities, cope with life’s challenges and better communicate their needs when they adopt a positive self-image and self-esteem. In fact, through a healthy internal dialog they ultimately become cheerleaders for their own success and learn to respect and love themselves.

The principles of learning and mind dynamics are always present. Whether or not we consciously teach our children to use these tools *using positive self-talk (Affirmations) to create a self-empowered internal dialog* one thing is for sure; “Our internal dialog has more to do with our success than any other factor in life.”

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