Director’s Corner: Cultivating Communication

The Children’s School’s “developmental goals” for communication direct us to focus broadly on oral communication via listening & speaking as well as written communication via reading & writing – all in age appropriate ways, from the time children enter the school until they leave. By explaining our approaches to meeting these goals, I hope to show the purposes behind our practices so that families can be similarly intentional in supporting children’s increasingly effective communication.

**Communication** - facilitating comprehension and expression skills beginning with oral and progressing to written language.

Children’s ability to learn oral language without direct instruction is amazing. Simple encouragement to participate in the naturally occurring conversations that are part of family and school life typically promotes appropriate developmental progressions, even with multiple languages being learned simultaneously, especially if children have exposure to effective models. I’m sure you’ve noticed, however, that children are just as capable of imitating the negative tone of voice and socially inappropriate words that they overhear, and that they usually do so at just the wrong time. That’s where consistently purposeful use of appropriate vocabulary, polite phrasing, and positive tones of voice, together with specific reinforcement, help children to use language for effective participation in varied social contexts. As with social skills, Children’s School educators use the triad of modeling, explicit instruction, and coaching to help individual children progress. Developing skills for reading and writing surely benefits from the same approaches, but there are two key differences, both of which stem from the need to process many MORE bits of information, with lots of potentially confusing similarities (e.g., b vs. p vs. d vs. q or to vs. too vs. two) and exceptions (e.g., why do enough and stuff rhyme when cough and cuff do not?). Because of this heavy “cognitive load”, the learning process for most children takes an extended period of time and involves frequent, repeated errors. We cannot, therefore, expect the same rapid progress that is evident for oral language development. In order to support children’s motivation for tackling the written language challenges, we must be extremely careful to encourage children’s efforts without emphasizing their mistakes. For these reasons, we focus on children’s communication of meaning rather than on conventional spelling, consistent letter sizing and orientation, etc. Research has shown that the key initial steps involve abilities to hear the separate sounds that together make words and then identifying the letter-sound correspondence. That’s why you hear us doing lots of activities with alliteration and rhyme.

Within each theme, educators introduce new vocabulary and offer opportunities for children to utilize new terms when they converse about theme-related activities. We also utilize many visual representations of words, often together with relevant pictures, so that children begin to build site word vocabulary and can easily find conventional spellings if they are interested. Interestingly, practicing mathematics skills for patterns also helps children notice common features across words, such as bat, brat, hat, that, sat, splat, etc., or distinguish features for commonly confused words, such as where, wear, were, and whir. Families can promote both oral and written communication by encouraging children’s involvement in conversation, story reading, and writing for real purposes. Enclosed with this newsletter, you’ll find an article with more detailed developmental sequences and suggestions. Offer multiple options and follow your child’s interests along the way.