Oral language skills form the foundation of literacy and academic success. A solid foundation of oral language helps children become successful readers, strong communicators, as well as increasing their confidence and overall sense of well-being.

The ability to use oral language effectively impacts all areas of a child’s life; from their ability to learn in the classroom, their relationships with others, their academic success and their sense of self. And further to that, there is evidence indicating that reduced oral language competence can lead to mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, which may persist into adulthood.

So how can educators help children build strong oral language and vocabulary skills?

**The Need for a High Quality Language Environment**

The development of these skills requires a high quality language environment which in turn creates a high quality learning environment. A high quality language environment is one in which there are regular and varied language experiences including reading books, asking and answering questions, conversation about experiences and storytelling.

Hart and Risley’s (1995) research showed a strong correlation between the amount of words a child is exposed to and the size of the vocabulary they develop. Children who heard over 2000 words an hour had vocabularies at 3 years of age around 1116 words, however children who had heard only 600 words per hour had developed vocabularies of just 525 words by 3 years of age. However it is not just the quantity of language but also the quality of language a child is exposed to that matters.

**So what are the principles of creating a high quality language environment in the home?**

1. **Children learn what they hear most**– repeated exposure to words, books, and conversation allow a child to learn new words and develop strong oral language skills.
2. **Children learn words for things and events that interest them** – rather than trying to divert a child’s attention, talk about what they are looking at and what they show an interest in. Children will learn more when they are interested than when they are drilled.
3. **Children learn best when they are engaged and interacting** – talk with a child rather than at them, expand on what the child says, comment on what the child is interested in and ask lots of questions.
4. **Children learn best in meaningful contexts** – playing with a child and engaging with them allows greater learning opportunities than direct instruction. For example, while playing with blocks an adult can model spatial language such as “Put the block behind the green block.” Or teaching math language during play with toy animals such as “Which one is bigger? How many sheep are there? Let’s make the same number of chickens in each pen.”
5. **Children need to hear a wide range of examples of words and language structures**– quality is important, not just quantity. Talk with children about lots of topics, read a wide range of books, sing songs and rhymes.

**How can home and school work together to foster a strong language environment?**

**Home**

Repeated exposure to a rich language environment results in successful communicators, readers and writers. In order to prepare children for school, parents need to understand the importance of oral language and be encouraged to communicate with and read to their child from a very early age. For more information on how parents can prepare their children for school, keep an eye out for the third installment in our Oral Language series this term **Giving children the best start for literacy – speaking and listening skills**.

**School**

With schools under pressure to produce results in literacy, children are being introduced to reading and writing in the Early Years and Foundation. However all the research indicates that without a strong foundation in oral language skills, children will not develop competency in reading and writing. Many children are missing out on important oral language skills and schools would be wise to incorporate a systematic approach to teaching oral language skills in these foundation years. See our [Whole School Literacy Plan](https://pld-literacy.org/product/pld-whole-school-literacy-strategy/) for a full scope and sequence. This document outlines a whole school plan for the explicit and systematic targeting of oral language.

**In Conclusion**

PLD has always been aware of the link between oral language and written language. Our approach to literacy is based on the understanding that a child’s vocabulary, sentence structure, comprehension and ability to process verbal instructions and communicate thoughts and ideas is directly linked to overall academic outcomes. PLD believes most children require home and school to work together to help children maximise their potential. Schools are in an excellent position to provide quality information to the families within their community and provide support for students to develop strong oral language skills. For more information on how schools can support oral language development, keep an eye out for our next blog (the second installment in our Oral Language series) [**Improving Oral Language**](https://pld-literacy.org/improving-oral-language-installment-2-of-3/).