

Of Dinosaurs and Excavators

Gendered Vocabulary Choices

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Photo by Larry Becker

So many words learned so rapidly, in a relatively short period of time. And so much may not understood. How can we help?

As vocabularies increase exponentially between 2 - 5 years of age, young children can be quite difficult to understand. They are increasing independence, leaving our sides, developing a community of their own peers in childcare and preschool, creating a situation where we aren't quite as privy to their developing vocabularies. But beyond increasing vocabularies and independence, there may be another contributing factor to decreasing intelligibility . . . simple gender differences. Please join me as I entertain this thought.

Having been an early childhood speech language pathologist for 25 years, I have heard a great deal of unintelligible speech, including young

children who speak in only vowels: *Ah ee oh oo uh ee?* Interestingly, I hear and actually get sort of used to what might be fully unintelligible speech for others' ears. Yes, I can sometimes understand what others don't, but every so often, I too, am completely baffled.

While I play with young children, my job is to be diligent, catching words and listening to intonation patterns. Admittedly because of my experiences, I succeed more often than not. As part of my knowledge base, I find error patterns in children's speech, and I can adjust fairly quickly.

There are typical errors that young children produce, such as substituting /t/ for /k/ sound, saying 'tat' for 'cat' or 'tar' for 'car'. Another typical error is to substitute 'd' for 'th' as in 'dat' for 'that'. But there is a smaller percentage of young children who present more challenging errors to decipher, for example a child who utilizes a favorite sound, such as /d/, placing it in the initial position in all words in a sentence, such as *Did Daddy doe do duh dore?* (*Did Daddy go to the store?*)

During play with children, in addition to being observant and noting what we're playing with, I listen to intonation patterns; the sing-songy fluctuations in speech. From the earliest vocalizations, infants and toddlers mimic adult intonations. So when I ask a question and a child vocalizes, *I uh oh*, with a familiar intonation, adding a gesture, such as the hands held palms up to the sides of the body at shoulder height, and an inquisitive facial expression, I conjecture that the

child is saying, "I don't know." All are clues leading to my educated guess. When I repeat, *You don't know?*, with a questioning look and my own hands up to my sides, the child often smiles. And by jove, I think I have it! It doesn't work every time, but taking all of these factors into consideration helps: vocalization + intonation + gestures + facial expression = successful communication. And remember, I pay attention to the circumstances in play - toys, activity, scenarios.

You too, can be a detective!

It helps to know what interests a child. When you enter their world of knowledge, their comfort zone, it becomes a bit easier to hold a conversation with children. But, there may exist differences between the genders.

Though we often try not to enforce gender differences especially in early childhood education programs and even in some homes, the differences between how boys and girls play do seem to just arise. Young boys often choose to play with dinosaurs and vehicles while the girls play with dolls and kitchens. Let's decipher just what this might mean.

LET'S LOOK AT THE DINOSAUR NAMES:

stegosaurus

brachiosaurus

ankylosaurus



triceratops

diplodocus

tyrannosaurus rex

Are you seriosaurus?

Photo by Kate Ross

When the dinosaur words are listed in front of you in black and white, the challenges should be evident. But let me explain from a speech language pathologist's point of view.

These dinosaur names are long words with several syllables. Each of these words consists of three or more syllables. Multi-syllabic words are really complicated to put together for early speakers. The mouth has to do an incredible amount of movement within a very short spurt of time. A speech language pathologist's nightmare, especially for those of us working with young children!

And oh Lordy those sounds! The consonant /s/ may take well into second grade before it is fully mastered. Check how many /s/'s are in each dinosaur name - most have at least two. And most have at least one /r/ - another difficult sound. Labeled a 'glide' because of its constant variability within speakers and among speakers, /r/

relies on what precedes or succeeds it in a word for proper placement in the mouth for production. So, 'er' is produced slightly differently from 'or'. There are children in many third grade classrooms who still cannot accurately produce /r/ sounds. It is a very difficult sound to perfect. Consonant blends, such as /st/, /br/ and /pl/ typically are mastered by the time a child reaches about 6 years old. Are you getting the picture here?

What were those scientists thinking when they labeled the great beasts? Certainly they were not thinking that one day young boys would be all over these creatures in their play, trying to label brontosaurus or triceratops. The scientists made it very difficult for their own offspring, but I'm certain that was furthest from their minds at the time of their monumental discoveries.

excavators

fire trucks

cement mixers



ditch diggers

bulldozers

cherry pickers

Wow-sers already!

I often giggle as parents embarrassingly describe to me what they hear from their child when a fire truck races by, sirens blaring - exciting anxious children to label this spectacular sight. 'Fire truck' is another difficult word combination with two /r/'s, the second of which is directly preceded by another consonant, /t/. Look at that double whammy! So keep in mind that this oft spoken vehicle name, 'fire truck', is actually quite difficult for a young tongue to manipulate. Try to forego your embarrassment as your child experiments, but do give them the corrected version in response.

NOW LET'S COMPARE TO THE PERHAPS TYPICAL VOCABULARY OF GIRLS:

*baby**bottle**night-night**doll**blanket**nuk**Is it becoming clear?*

Creation by Sasha Ross Becker

Photo by Alena Ross Becker

These are shorter words with some of the earliest developmental sounds, /b, p, m, d, t, n/. Beyond the /bl/ in 'blanket', there are no consonant blends, no /r/ or /s/ sounds. By the time young children are using these words in their play, these particular sounds should be well-established in their repertoire.

As boys and girls play, especially in pretend play, they practice daily routines. Both boys and girls ask for food, bottles and blankets in play and in routines. Girls continue to practice these 'caretaker' words in their pretend play. Boys begin to segregate to the dinosaur and vehicle pretend play. Boys are not getting extra pronunciation practice beyond the daily routines.

Unless perhaps a family member is a construction worker or fire fighter, the boys focus on this challenging vocabulary only in play. Those dinosaurs are extinct, so additional practice beyond play may be non-existent, too.

Articulating intelligibly, making yourself understood takes practice, just like a musical instrument. The more you practice the better you articulate.

Thus, I hypothesize that complicated word choices may be an important issue not to be overlooked when considering the higher unintelligibility rates among boys vs. girls.

Another well-known gender difference is that boys tend to be active, noise-producing play partners where girls tend to be docile yet talkative. Girls tend to be more interested in using language than boys.

When we enter the world of our children, engaging in play with them, letting them lead the activity, and being fully present with them, we learn about their interests and consequently their vocabulary. We can strategically add words to their activity, perhaps new words, perhaps reinforcing and altering what they already use. For example, if your son says, *Wontosow wants gween weaves*, you might follow this with: *Yes, brontosaurus has a really long neck to eat those green leaves. Long-neck. Maybe we can call him 'Long-neck. What do you think?'* The suggestion just may be met with a smile and a repeat. No judgement was placed on your son's speech. It was a sneaky way to present a more achievable alternative.

With simple, yet strategic methods, adults may better be able to understand what children are

saying. Remember to ***be a detective***:

- ***Be observant of activity, objects and play scenarios***
- ***Listen carefully to intonation and vocalization***
- ***Watch for supportive gestures***
- ***Check the facial expression***

We will better be able to enter the child's world of knowledge and interest. Smoother conversation will likely occur. And the children will be happier with conversational partners to discuss their interests.

Long neck look out for that ditch digger!

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A thirty year veteran speech language pathologist and early childhood educator managing my own private practice for many years - I've heard much of it - I'm certain not all. I love my job because I get to play as I work! Who can ask for anything more? Hoping you find this self-published article helpful. Please check out more information at my website: <http://www.edukater-slp.com>