

Integrated Speech for the Young Child

As we have discussed, Speech is a very powerful tool. How and when one speaks, as much as what one says, has a formative impact on everyone around.⁴⁸ The major principles are discussed in the Foundation Guides; here we will focus in on the young child in specific.

In early childhood there are five major areas in which speech has a significant impact – whether we use it to support wellbeing or not. Interestingly, all of these areas are impacted in the same way by the same kinds of speech. The five major areas are:

- Fostering overall integration;
- Nurturing a “sinking in” or absorption;
- Supporting discovery learning;
- Absorbing the art of language; and
- Development of “true” or integrated speech *within* the child.

As we have discussed, speech can activate the body, the heart, or the mind – or any combination of the three. For the most part, the modern tendency to speak to young children in a “head on,” “straight forward” manner, explaining and analyzing the world, stems from a desire to respect them. However, as we have also discussed,⁴⁹ that is not what happens. This kind of directness (“I want you to...” “You must...” “The stars appear to blink because their light has to cross our atmosphere...” “Sally is going to put one strand over the next, left to right, so ...”) causes the young child to pull back, to attempt to figure out, i.e. to jump into mind by contracting and separating. By definition, standing back to analyze, make choices, or judge is a separation or division and therefore not supportive of the young child’s health. Because this does not mirror her inner state of oneness, **instead of experiencing the intended honor and respect, she experiences a harshness and fear born of premature separation.**

In the Enki approach we work to use our speech to create a seamless environment that draws the young children into a non-conscious participation in life. Rather than “talking at” them or even “talking with” them, we seek to use both spoken language and silence to create a world that they can enter – a world into which they are drawn. They join the world we offer, AS IT IS, and they ride along in the safety of our care.

48 See Foundations Book III/Integration of Body, Speech, and Mind/speech

49 See Foundations/Integrating Body, Speech, and Mind/speech/speech as our ally

As we work with the language of image, story, and song as a means to invoke a particular experience, the child naturally sinks into the state of absorption on which her health depends at this early stage of development. Describing the wind in terms of how it sings in the trees and makes them dance, how it calls across the distant valleys, how it whispers to the butterflies, all bring the child into an experience of wind that no explanation of thermal currents or measurements of the angle of the bend in the trees, or temperature differentials, possibly could. The world comes alive and she is naturally part of it.

It is here in this experience of herself as part of a living world that she finds integration, and from integration that she settles in to her world deeply – for the young child, the two are inseparable and interdependent.

This does not mean that there is never a time to be direct and wakeful in our speech. As we have described,⁵⁰ sometimes boundaries must be set for safety. Calling out, “Stop” when a child is running into the street, is appropriately wakeful and separating. We want the child to separate from the experience and feel fear. We want that separation to lodge itself deeply. But these moments will have all the more impact if they are the exception and not the way of life. They will also have more impact if they are not followed by explanation and discussion but by a simple stating of the facts descriptively, “No going in the street alone. The cars will hit you.” We want to activate the survival cycle in this case, but, as described in the preceding section on integration of body, if this is a way of life the child will be living in and expected – or actual – fight/flight-freeze pattern that blocks access to inherent vitality and thus both learning and wellbeing.

At this stage, birth to age 7, any speech that activates mind works directly against integration. It is speaking to body and heart that nurtures integration.

What is this language of the body and heart? **It is the language of description, and it speaks to both heart and body.** When we describe *what is*, we draw the listener into their own visceral, sensory experience of phenomena - and, as described in the child development section,⁵¹ all integration in the early years happens through the senses. including the kinaesthetic, or movement, sense.

For example, imagine a situation where you are sitting on the beach with your child and the waves are crashing at your feet. The child watches silently, clearly entranced. Finally, he says, “When will they stop?” or “Where do the waves come from?” You – with your Enki perspective – reply in synch with the rhythm of the wave’s movement say, “Up and up,

50 See Foundations Book III/Rubber Meets Road/adult as trusted container/meeting the moment

51 See Foundations Book II/Mirroring Child Development/the young child

into the sky . . . ; boom, crashing down again.” Maybe you repeat it. The child’s breath and body follow the suspense in your voice - and in the waves mounting and crashing.

On the other hand, imagine someone in the same situation who answers, “The air five miles out at sea has experienced a barometric fall which in turn exerts pressure on the surface of the water causing a displacement and . . . ”

In which approach are you leading the child to sink into the wave’s movement - and thus himself?

Description is simple and tangible. It is here the child finds a door into direct experience. On the other hand, when we explain what is - or what we think is - we ask that the child to stand back and weigh and analyze and judge. He is then, by definition, reflecting on an experience rather than living it. Yes, there is a time and place for this, but it is rarely in the early childhood years. Looking from the perspective described in the child development section, this section is the time of “root setting”; if we want our “plant” (child) to flower fully in the years to come, we need to be sure roots are fully set in their time - flexible and creative thinking are the flower of full absorption.

The young child is also developing inner speech. This is the speaking that will become her navigation tool as she works her way through life, i.e. the system of distilled codes that she speaks internally to help her control her impulses and to figure her way through the most complex and theoretical of problems, and the grandest of visions. This development doesn’t begin until about 4 years old, and it is not fully functional until about 8 years old.

How can we support the development of this very important capacity. When we talk beside the child, sharing the wonders of life as well as the challenges she is navigating, we cultivate her inner speech. When we “talk at” her we undermine inner speech, because we activate the survival mechanism and therefore separate her from her own experience.⁵² Asking the child to understand and to reflect on experience are both ways to separate her from that experience, and thus from development of inner speech.

Direct eye-contact used to foster understanding is another way of “talking at” the child. Because the eyes are the “window to the soul,” children feel invaded and threatened when we look at them with the intent to “tell” them something. Simply put, physically, you cannot both stand with someone facing the world and look directly at her!

52 See Foundations III/Integration of Body, Speech, and Mind/speech/inner speech/cultivating inner speech

This is not to say there is no time or place for soft gazing, sharing love, or casual exchange while looking into the child's eyes, but that is very different from using eye contact to "teach" understanding or clarify consequences.

In these early childhood years, the time of heightened "body of Body," "speech of Body" and "mind of Body,"⁵³ the literal act of speaking is a central focus; he is roughing in information for the world that lies ahead. The child is exploring and discovering that which will bring him connection and skill down the road. He has to explore the actual reality of words, of sounds, of speaking, of listening – and more often than not, he does this rather incessantly. If we can see all this as exploration and play, we can support him in this, and limit our own speaking so his inner speech has room to grow.

In an enthusiastic effort to offer the child all we can, we often use language in a way that interrupts the child's discovery process. When we point out the squirrel, or the wind bending the trees, or the moon in the sky, we take the opportunity to discover these away from the child. On the whole, children notice everything. If we can give them a few extra minutes to find the special event themselves, we seat them in discovery learning⁵⁴ and they feel the resulting empowerment – it is *their* discovery as opposed to another thing to be accumulated.

If the child does not notice and we have decided the flower or tractor is sufficiently important to draw his attention there, then we can walk toward what we want the child to see and, again, wait and watch. Our movement and attention will shift his. We can kneel beside him and silently point. Finally, if we are still determined that this is worthy of re-focusing his attention, we can come forth with a song or poem to spark his observation. When we see the squirrels chasing each other we can recite part of a poem he knows or speak in image: "Little squirrels scurry round to gather up their store. . . ." or "Round and round they run, straight from earth to sun. . . ." We can leave this hanging in the air and wait – children will, most of the time, discover on their own. The central learning is about discovery not about squirrels!

For all the times they miss what we have seen, the empowerment and delight of the times they discover on their own will far outweigh the loss! This sense of empowerment, of "the world is mine to discover," becomes part of their "learning compass." The children approach learning as the goal, rather than the acquisition of any particular information, material, or experience. Silence and patience – our own noticing of the children's process – become the central tools to support their learning. All of these are ways to strengthen the

53 See Foundations II/Mirroring Child Development/Heightened Body Awareness

54 Foundations III/Activity of Learning/Discovery Learning

child's learning process and thus empower the child. On the other hand, keeping a running commentary on life is a good way to weaken both!

Certainly there are times when it is positive to point out and name something the child has not seen or doesn't have the tools to see on his own – especially when they are very little. The toddler who has never seen a frog is unlikely to notice the silent frog trying to camouflage itself on the lily pad! A soft pointing and naming may open up the world in this situation, but it will be important to continually come back to noticing when our pointing things out is actually serving the child and when it is weakening his own powers of discovery.

In the excitement and delight of watching our children learn, many of us are overwhelmed with good old enthusiasm and find it hard to hold our tongues. There is nothing inherently wrong or bad about the impulse, actually there is everything good and right about it. But that does not mean we have to act on it – instead we can use it to wake up our own observation of the child. **We can look at this approach not as oppressing our enthusiasm, but as expanding it further – to seeing the deepest processes of the child's growth.**

Beth, developer of Enki:

With my own children and with the dozens and dozens of children I have taught over the years, I found it very easy, actually fully natural, to stand back and let them discover – their learning was my focus. Speaking to them through the environment was a delight. But once my first grandchild was toddling about, I became a pitiful chatterbox – I call it “grandparent syndrome”! I certainly knew better, but keeping my mouth shut and sitting as the “archetypal grandmother” I knew he needed (as opposed to the living grandmother I am) had been near impossible. It seemed as though at every moment I was literally bursting with delight in the world before us, desperate to share it, and chattering my way through it all.

I told myself to stop, but to no avail. Finally, knowing that oppression and shoulds never help anyone and would certainly not work on me, I decided to look at the whole issue as “playing Enki.” Now when I want to point something out, I say to myself – or my husband says to me – “Let's play Enki,” and I am able to shift my attention back to my grandson's learning. And, not surprisingly, he is calmer and more present and delighted by each thing he comes upon. He is seeing every aspect of life anew each time, without my overlay messing it up. In turn, I am calmer and more deeply nourished by his learning than I had been by pointing out flowers and tractors!

Even if we agree with the underlying principles just described, what happens when the children are misbehaving and we need to teach them “right from wrong,” “safe from “unsafe”? **This is one of the singly most important places we manifest our belief in inherent wis-**

dom and vitality, and our commitment to setting the child's compass towards health – or not! If we do not teach him to turn towards his own wellbeing, we teach him to speak with “forked tongue.” Children do not misbehave for no reason. Something is bothering them or they would not hit, pinch, grab, and so on. The usual approach to working with this is to tell the children who they should be. We tell them to say they are sorry, when they are not sorry. We tell them to be nice, when they don't feel nice. We try to make them understand who they should be through ideas and concepts, and not through living engagement. **We ask them to lie and to split – and later wonder why they do those very things!**

We can make another choice here, a choice that affirms the children's inherent goodness, helps develop inner speech, and helps them reintegrate. All told, this sets the children's internal compass towards his own vitality or wellbeing. It requires a radical shift in perspective to a focus on trusting our inherent nature, to investing in developing inner speech, and to being patient even though it may not look good to the neighbors!

Let's look at an example: think about the preschooler who hits another child for taking his toy. More often than not the parent will say some version of: “Be nice; say you're sorry. Let's not hurt Johnny; you want to share your toys, right?” In the world of truth, that translates as, “How you feel is bad so lie about it. Johnny matters more than you, so split inside to fit on the outside.” Ouch. And the vast majority of us have done this many, many times though it is the last thing we would ever want to communicate! When we do this, we set the child's internal compass away from himself and his reality. We fracture his world, and in the end, this increases the very aggression and violence we are trying to counter.

There is a choice to be made. Instead of this cultivation of self-abandonment, we can stand *with* the child in his truth. What is it that actually lets any of us override the impulse to strike out or scream – an impulse we all have at some level? Yes, sometimes we override the impulse just because we feel social pressure and shame. How health-affirming is that? What would happen if instead we realize we are hungry or tired or sad – and turn our attention to dealing with this? **This is actually what the children need us to teach them: how to recognize what their deep need is and address it.** This learning happens very slowly, over a long period of time, but it is an investment for life – it is setting their compasses towards health.

So in the case of the child who hit Johnny, we can stand with him. Literally standing next to him, we can hold his hands gently to stop the actual violence, and say, “No hitting” as a description of the boundary we are enforcing. It is a boundary we are taking responsibility for, and not a lecture about who he should be – i.e. we are not going to let hitting happen. It plants a seed that his inner speech can harvest when he is developmentally ready.

But that is the least of it. From there, having established safe boundaries, it is up to the adult to perceive and name what is happening for the child. “Food time, we are hungry, (or tired, sad, angry, scared, etc.)” Just naming what *IS* and shifting the child's attention back to his needs – and your attention with it – is the ground. This sets the child's compass to recognize

discomfort as internal. Then you deal with it: “We need some food, (rest, quiet time, alone time, mommy time, etc.)” In this you are teaching him to respond to his own discomfort by taking care of himself and not by lashing out (or withdrawing). You are not teaching his mind who he *should be*, but his whole self who he *is*.

As the child gets older, this sitting together, or walking together, opens a space to talk with her in a non-invasive manner. This allows the child to go through the process of changing behavior without an overlay of shame, but instead with interest in his own process. This experience becomes his compass to work with difficult feelings.

Experience is the only real teacher. Each experience strengthens the pathway so that when his brain development is such that inner speech can kick in, a solid experiential ground has been laid. And it is one that says, without concept, “You are safe because I will hold the boundary when you cannot. How you feel matters. What you need matters, and I will see that you get it or mourn with you when I can’t.” The feeling of discomfort or anxiety, sorrow, whatever, becomes associated with recognizing what is needed and responding for health and wellbeing. What more can we ask of anyone? What more do we want for them?

If Johnny is really hurt, you might need to attend to him first – but that can be done without judgment or blame – just giving Johnny what he needs. If he is not really hurt, then maybe once the hitter is settled you want to model a caring apology yourself. You might say something like: “Johnny, I am so sorry you are hurt” – no judgments, no shoulds, just the truth.

Some might question if this approach teaches the children that by lashing out they get what they need. But that is based on the assumption that we are basically bad and our driving force is to get what we can for ourselves and run over others. In truth, what happens when we honor someone’s needs is that her wellbeing is nurtured and thus her compassion and generosity are sparked – she accesses the center of the Enki web and with it, real compassion is fostered. This is one of the places where our true commitment to “vitality as our inherent birthright” is profoundly tested; it is a big paradigm shift!

Whether navigating daily life, sharing something special, or educating inner speech, the teacher’s spoken language and the stories, verses, and songs she chooses are of primary importance in the Enki approach at all ages, but never is it more important than in early childhood. The language of the stories and verses we choose should be high quality, poetic, descriptive, and full of life. For the young child that sense of life depends on speaking to the body, i.e. sensation and movement. Our language should not only be image rich, but also be full of activity (verbs) and description (adjectives and adverbs), and not conclusions. For

example, language such as “As she skipped through the meadow, the wind danced in her hair and played with her outstretched hands” brings the child into the activity. But “As she crossed the meadow she was happy. The wind made her feel like dancing ...” brings her into *ideas* about the experience and tells her how *she should* react or feel. Images that bring forward rich activity create an experience that the child can relate to as best serves her. She can sink into the experience without a prescribed reaction and without having to figure out the “what,” “why” or “wherefore.” She can experience from within, rather than trying to understand from the outside. This supports the union that the young child seeks; one which is the base of her health – it leaves her to meet the world in freedom.⁵⁵

When we speak to the child in rhythms and images that invoke the experience of the subject at hand, we also give her an experience of the spoken language as intimately connected to phenomena themselves and not just as symbols for something else. This is the education of the poet and artist – the art of the language. During the early years of a child’s life, throughout the period when absorption and imprinting are her primary modes of learning,⁵⁶ we will teach her more of the art of language than any college writing course ever will. **No understanding of grammar, no knowledge of sentence structure or types of writing will ever touch the impact of the spoken language to which the child is exposed during the first eight years of her life.** All that she studies from that point on is just a process of labeling and taking conscious hold of what she already knows in her system. On the other hand, rebuilding a feel for the language after she is eight years old is a major undertaking, if it is possible at all.

As we work with our own language to stand in wonder and bring forward an experience of what *is* rather than what *should* be, we also model for the children what it is to speak in an integrated way. As we have said, nothing has a greater impact than what we model.⁵⁷ As we use our language to bring forward the truth – as we give up speaking with “forked tongue” – we teach the children to do the same. Ultimately there is no other way they will learn this.

55 See Foundations II/Mirroring Child Development/the early years

56 See Foundations II/Mirroring Child Development/the early years

57 See Foundations I and II/adult models