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Sherry Artemenko, left, the founder of Play on Words, spends some time with one of her clients, Sydney Fontaine, 23 months, during a recent home visit.

Building Skills Through Play

Artemenko Teaches How To Expand Speech, Language

BY RITA PAPAIZIAN

Speech and language pathologist Sherry Artemenko recalls visiting a client, the parent of a 9-month-old child in the home where there were "literally hundreds of toys," the former Fairfield Public Schools educator said. She noticed that the child's interest went to the outside where a carpenter was fixing a deck.

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"So we went outside and talked to the carpenter because that is what interested the child."

Artemenko told that story to illustrate one of her key bits of advice she gives parents of children who are infants to 3 years old. "Follow the child's attention and talk about what he or she is interested in," said the mother of three adult sons. The Southport resident espoused her advice during a visit to the Halley Avenue home of Diane Fontaine, the mother of two daughters, Addison, 4, and Sydney, 2.

Since she established her business, Play on Words, in June, Artemenko has been conducting home visits and talking to new moms groups about how parents can play with their children to enhance speech and language development. The Fontaines enlisted the pathologist to work with their daughters, first with Addison and now Sydney.

"For me, it's training me in how to play with my kids," said Fontaine, who has noticed a positive change in her daughters' language development.

During the home visits, Artemenko applies her language development strategies as she plays with the children. During the sessions she consults with the parent and

demonstrates the proven strategies to enhance the speech and language development. She offers an individual plan tailored to the child's developmental stage.

Initially, Fontaine invited Artemenko into her home to work with Addison, who her mother felt was not using the language as proficiently as she thought she should be. She heard how other children were speaking and thought her daughter was not speaking at a similar level. Also, she had difficulty understanding her daughter. Within a couple of weeks of working with the pathologist, Fontaine noticed her daughter began to talk more. She started using two-word sentences. Pleased with the success, Fontaine asked Artemenko to conduct some play sessions with Sydney.

Artemenko said a 2-year-old should understand approximately 300 words and have a vocabulary of 50 words. Also, the toddler should be able to put two to three words together. She described this expression as "telegraphic speech," in which the child uses main words, such as "want book."

When talking with their children, parents should avoid asking questions because they tend to frustrate the children, who then tend not to say anything at all. "It's not natural; it puts the child on the spot," said Artemenko. Fontaine said she was guilty of asking too many questions, such as "What's this? What's that?" as a way to get her daughters to talk.

"Talk about what's happening," Artemenko said. "Look at the baby. The baby is in the basket ... Never correct a child's speech. It inhibits speech. Use the correct sound yourself. Make it positive. You're modeling, not correcting."

Artemenko, who has more than 27 years experience as a speech and language pathologist in public and private schools, emphasizes the importance of children engaging in investigative or pretend play, not passive activity, to enhance speech and language development. "I'm not for flash cards or instant videos. Children learn through hands-on experience," she said.

In working with parents and children, Artemenko discusses not only the strategies to apply through play, but also what toys to



Sherry Artemenko plays with Sydney Fontaine as part of a technique that builds learning skills. Sydney's mother, Diane, looks on during the lesson.

select and books to read. She emphasizes the importance of a child playing with toy people and animals. When children play with toy cars, they will say, "Varoom, varoom." She suggests parents set up a gasoline station with people. Then the child will engage in conversation.

"There are toys that set the agenda for the child. I want the child to set the agenda. Sometimes the best toys do the least amount. I like toys without so much razzmatazz. Pretend play is so important for language."

Additionally, parents should read books that are age appropriate. For example, during her home visit with Sydney, Artemenko sat on the floor with the child reading "Pudgy, a puppy to love" by Pippa Goodhart.

In the past, Fontaine said, when reading a book to her daughter she would say, "What is the dog's name?"

"No, just talk," Artemenko said. "This is a very good book because it's very simple

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and it talks about feelings. She suggests parents read books and talk about the book with their children.

At the end of each session, Artemenko gives the parent a list of strategies and suggestions for play sessions to enhance language and speech. According to research, Artemenko said there is a "window of opportunity" from birth to 3 years when talking to your baby can reinforce the pathways in the baby's brain that will enhance the ability to learn throughout life.

She said research suggests that talking to your child using simple strategies can stimulate speech and language development. This can

increase vocabulary, improve grammar, encourage creative play and enhance a child's attention span and IQ. Research also shows that a child's language development is linked to the ability to learn and think and ultimately learn to read and write.

In addition to working with parents and children in their homes, Artemenko talks to new moms, parent groups and even play groups. She regularly presents her Play on Words philosophy to the Tender Beginnings Newborn Mothers Group at Greenwich Hospital. Also, she has addressed Mothers of Multiples of Lower Fairfield County, as well as programs sponsored by pediatri-

cians, toys stores and children's clothing stores.

Her work takes her into homes with "Stay At Home" moms who welcome the break in the day when someone can come into the home and work with them and their child. She finds working moms welcome the opportunity to learn how to "play" with their children in a manner that enhances speech and language because in this way, the working moms feel they are having quality time with their children.

Artemenko said Play on Words is unique. "I don't know who else is doing this. I know when you teach a parent, the child benefits. The result is that the child develops good language skills, forms a bond with the parent and becomes interested in reading."

What has surprised her since she started her own business? "I'm amazed what babies are capable of and I'm thrilled with the parents I work with."

She said she has been surprised in a funny way. One time she was working with a child and the father. When she said something to the child, the father rephrased what she said. Listening to the way he said the phrase, she said, "You're an engineer, aren't you?" The answer was "yes."

For further information about Play on Words, call 259-6161 or e-mail sherryartemenko@yahoo.com.