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More Than Child's Play

Artemenko Teaches How to Expand Language During Playtime

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Stephanie Maxtone-Graham, a Greenwich parent of Luke, 2, and Nicholas, 17 months, is aware of the boom in baby sign language, a trend many parents are talking about to get a jump-start on language development.

She's delved into the latest books about childhood development regarding when children should begin communicating. And she's spent time in bookstores sifting through titles that are recommended reading for particular age levels.

But instead of feeling relieved and informed about language development, she felt overwhelmed.

"Every bookstore seems to think they know what your child should be reading, but they don't know your child," she said.

So when she picked up a flier in town about Shelly Artemenko's new business called Play on Words, her instincts told her that she could finally find out exactly where her children should be in terms of language skills and perhaps enhance their speech development.

And she was right.

In the last nine months, there have been positive changes in Luke's language development.

"Luke's teacher has told me he is the only one communicating in full sentences," said Maxtone-Graham. "It's been an education for my husband and I to understand what level he should be at instead of guessing when we walk into a store."

"My friends have asked me, 'How did you do that?' And I tell them, 'Not by myself,' she said with a laugh.

One might say she had a personal trainer. That's how Artemenko, whose career in education and speech language pathology has spanned more than 22 years, refers to herself.

"I am like a personal trainer to new moms and dads to show them how to enhance speech and language skills through play," Artemenko explained, adding that the typical age group she focuses on is infancy to three years of age.

"I go to a home, get down on the floor and play with their baby, talk about typical development for that age, give the parents strategies to enhance language through play and talk about good toys and books for that age."

"In an age where parents are bombarded with flash cards and videos, I share research that shows the best way to impart language is through play and experience."

During a visit to the Maxtone-Graham home on Monday, she began the hour-long session by playing with a musical motorized fishing game, constantly keeping Luke engaged in a conversation. She pointed out to



Luke Maxtone-Graham, 2, hooks a fish during a playtime session with Sherry Artemenko, owner of Play on Words. Through her new business, she helps new parents enhance language skills through play.

GREENWICH CITIZEN photos / Nicole Rivard

Maxtone-Graham the positive characteristics about the playroom that can actually encourage language development.

She liked that there were a variety of toys set up, like a train set and a table with chairs where the children could create things with Play-Doh.

"A lot of parents don't like messes, but a messy playroom is a good thing," said Artemenko, a Southport resident.

"Parents should be the producers of playtime, not directors. They should set up different types of play areas and let the child come to them and create and engage in imaginative play. They should follow the children's lead and then get them to talk about what they are doing."

She also advised Maxtone-Graham to expand upon their playtime and relate it to the child's own experience whenever possible. For example, as Luke played with a swimming pool, she told Stephanie it would be a good opportunity to talk to him about when and where he goes swimming.

"Children learn language through experience," Artemenko said.

During the session, she also reminded Stephanie that a good language toy is never complete without people and/or animals because they will encourage the child to talk in longer sentences as they describe what the people are doing. With a matchbox car, on the other hand, they might simply mimic the sounds a car makes, like "varoom" or "beep, beep."

The Joy of Reading

The second half of the session focused on reading. She read selections by Rosemary Wells and Lucy Cousins, pausing regularly to let Luke interject his own comments on the words and illustrations.

A common mistake parents make when reading and talking with their children is asking too many questions. It can actually inhibit language because it puts the child on the spot.

Instead of asking Luke what the mouse in the picture was doing, Artemenko said things like "Look at the mouse. The mouse spilled the milk." She never corrected Luke's

speech. Instead she made the correct sound as a model for him.

"It's not about teaching them to read, it's teaching them to enjoy reading," Artemenko said.

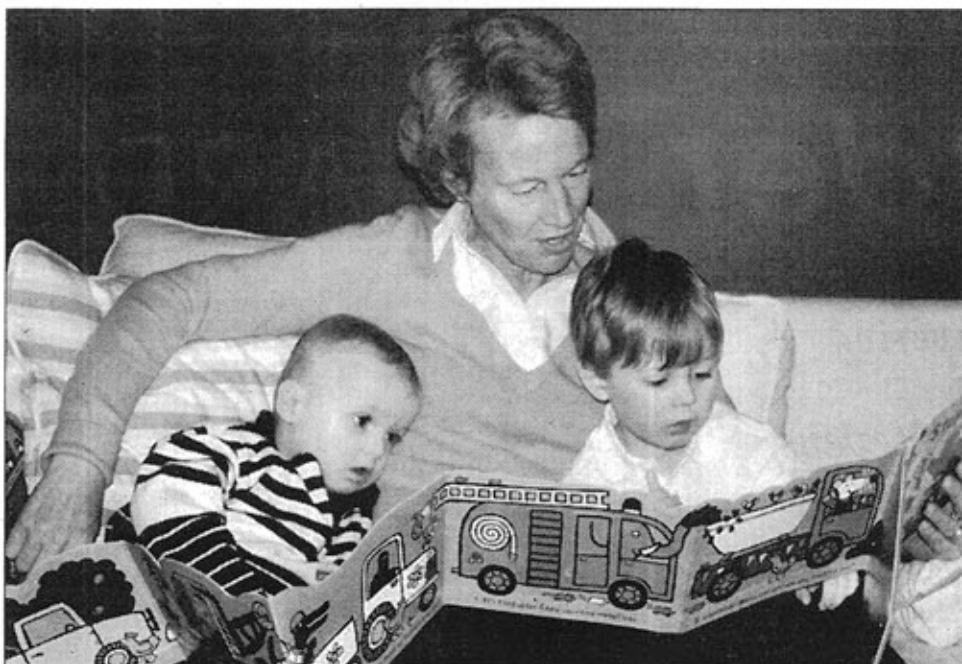
In terms of her own enjoyment, she said it is fulfilling knowing that working with parents is making a difference with children.

"I love walking into a house where a child was hardly talking and have them greet me at the door saying, 'Sherry, come upstairs and play.'"

Artemenko also discusses her Play on Words Philosophy with new moms groups such as the Tender Beginnings New Mothers Group at Greenwich Hospital. For information, call Artemenko at 259-6161 or e-mail sherryartemenko@yahoo.com. Her Web site, www.playonwords.biz, will be launched in the next few weeks.

Business Snapshot

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Artemenko reads with Nicholas and Luke, letting them interject whenever they want.