



# PROMISE

**THE EARLY  
YEARS:  
A TIME OF**

**THE CHILDREN'S SCHOOL**



# THE POWER OF THE SPOKEN WORD

The thoughtful use of language is a way of life at The Children’s School. From the moment students pass through our doors to the end of every school day, they are immersed in a language-rich environment, which is the gateway to learning as well as the foundation for healthy human development. At TCS, *language is everything*.

That is why the School asked Lydia Soifer, Ph.D., an internationally renowned pediatric language and literacy specialist, to give one of its parenting lectures this past year. She shares TCS’s conviction about the universality of language, asserting that it drives the curriculum in every school, no matter the subject. Dr. Soifer has made it her life’s work to share her deep knowledge of and passion for language with children, families and educators in a variety of settings, including in her private practice, primary and secondary schools, and as a pediatrics professor and member of the faculty in the Early Intervention Training Institute at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine.

What an inspiring speaker Dr. Soifer turned out to be! After conducting a workshop with teachers during the day, she spoke in the evening to a rapt audience of parents, explaining both the critical importance of language skills to the growing child and the essential role that families play in nurturing them. In fact, many techniques used by TCS teachers—affirmative language, paraphrasing and active listening—are ones that she maintains parents should use, too. Whether

at home or school, modeling careful listening and speaking skills for children is key since they are the building blocks of reading and writing. Moreover, the considerate listener of a child’s thoughts, concerns or questions, coupled with a kind response, conveys respect and boosts the self-confidence of the young.

Titled “The Power of the Spoken Word,” Dr. Soifer’s lecture focused on oral language—the foundation of literacy—in the early years. She described a remarkable process that begins at birth when infants hear and remember *speech*, meaning the noise, the discrete and blended sounds that adults make; *language*, or words themselves; and *communication*, which is words accompanied by physical and facial expressions as well as vocal intonations.

Astonishingly, this intensive period of listening and memory building results in six- to nine-month-old babies understanding, well before they can talk, what people say. Equally impressive, Dr. Soifer observed, is babies’ ability to discern that language has a purpose, and that people use it for reasons such as explaining, requesting or reprimanding. In short, the youngest among us are paying close attention: they are listening both to the sounds, or phonemes, of vowels or consonants that make up words we say and to our intonation patterns and shifts. In their discovery of features of speech, they come to understand what someone means or intends and gather information that will help them to speak someday.

“Oral language is usually complex, but adults don’t think of it that way because it comes so naturally to us,” said Dr. Soifer, who was also a contributor to the textbook *Multisensory Structured Language Teaching: Theory and Practice*, which is now in its fourth edition. “We take it for granted and we shouldn’t. Why? Because all adults need to give children a massive linguistic foundation. That’s why we should talk to kids a lot. That’s why we should use our voices so richly. That’s why we should vary what we say. We need to do these things to give them enormous exposure to language, which boosts their linguistic foundation.”

When toddlers can control their facial, mouth and tongue muscles, they begin to say words themselves. Their oral language increases exponentially, from about 25 words at 18 months to between 2,000 and 2,500 words by age 5. In addition, they speak in past, present and future tense when they are about 5 and use irregular verbs correctly. They probably don’t know what an irregular verb is conceptually, but they are able to use it in proper context, which is a marvelous feat in and of itself.

With language development flourishing by the minute in the early years, parents have an extraordinary opportunity both to enhance their children’s verbal fluency and vocabulary and to shape their thinking and problem-solving abilities. Everything from reading aloud at bedtime to shopping for groceries, from repairing a picture frame to answering the phone,

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are “teaching moments,” according to Dr. Soifer, who recommended parents ask themselves, “How can I use language so that my child can learn, really love learning, and feel good about themselves?”

One answer is to engage children verbally while they play. There are few moments as conducive to exposing a child to the tremendous variety of language—from the imaginative to the practical—than during unstructured play. Connecting oral language to thinking skills, for instance, can be accomplished by parents modeling self-talk as they play. “Adults might say, ‘Let me think about how I want my blocks to line up,’” said Dr. Soifer. “They can narrate their thought process, ‘Well, first I’m going to put the big pieces here and the small pieces over there. No wait, I’ll move the small ones closer, so they are easier to reach.’” Thinking out loud helps children’s organizational skills, Dr. Soifer noted, while floating a hypothesis, “I wonder what will happen if I put this heavy block on top?” invites them to contribute their own ideas.

Play is how children learn about planning, problem-solving and cooperating with others. These skills are not born and practiced in silence, but grow from language, which helps to clarify and strengthen them. At the same time, Dr. Soifer urged the audience not to get bogged down narrating their thoughts during play. “Don’t forget that play is supposed to be fun. You may not do it well, but you can’t do it wrong.”

The same spirit should guide families trying to create a language-rich milieu at home, traveling in the car, or wherever they may be with children. The expressive environment should be fun, open and not demanding, Dr. Soifer emphasized. Instead of asking children questions such as “What did you do in school today,” which children might hear as an interrogation, it is

best, she said, to encourage conversation by reflecting or musing aloud. “If you make comments and observations,” she said, “you are more likely to have a conversation with a child. It shows you are bringing in a level of engagement. It’s not interrogation, it’s engagement.”

How best to expand a child’s vocabulary? The approach Dr. Soifer suggested is one often heard in The Children’s School classrooms. It involves rephrasing and extending a child’s words with more complex vocabulary or sentence structure. For example, when a child says, “It was a big surprise!” this strategy calls for a parent or teacher to restate and expand on that comment by saying, “Yes, it was an enormous, gargantuan surprise!” Children delight in learning new words because it helps them feel that they possess the power of language. Of course, the tried-and-true method of reading books together is another way to expose children to new vocabulary and excite them about the possibilities of language and self-expression.

A keen awareness of the power of the spoken word in a child’s development is the best place to start for parents who want to open their children to the wonders of language. “Be conscious of this gift, of how you use it, of why and when you use it,” said Lydia Soifer. “Because what you give is very much what you are going to get back from children in terms of language development for the rest of their lives. It’s cheap, this noise, but its price is invaluable.”

