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Slowing speech eases child's ability to listen

By SUZANNE PEREZ TOBIAS

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Advertisement

WICHITA, Kan. (AP) -- Toddlers can be a tough audience lively, distracted, always on the move – but Amy Hockenberry knows how to grab them.

"Let's get in a circle," she tells her class at Wichita State University's Child Development Center. "We're going to sing some songs."

Hockenberry speaks slowly and clearly. The children watch her intently, then meld into a cluster for music time.

Wichita State audiology professor Ray Hull would say the children heard something unusual and irresistible: an adult they can understand.

Because the trick to get children to listen to really hear and comprehend, whether they're toddlers or high school students isn't speaking up, Hull says.

It's slowing down.

According to Hull, the average adult speaks at a rate of almost 170 words per minute. But the average 5- to 7- year-old processes speech at a rate of only 120 words per minute.

The gap between what a child hears and what he or she understands can appear to parents and teachers as inattention, confusion or outright defiance.

"My daughter says, `My teacher talks so fast, I can't hear her,'" Hull said.

"If teachers would slow down, they would be less frustrated, the children would be less frustrated, and children would learn with greater ease."

Just in time for another school year, Hull is preaching the gospel of slowing down. He was scheduled to appear on a segment of NBC's "Today" show, and his research shows up regularly in national publications, from scholarly journals to the New York Times and Prevention magazine.

Hull said he believes there could be fewer cases of learning disabilities, hearing problems and behavior problems if adults who work with children would slow their speech.

How slow? Think Mr. Rogers.

"There's a reason children were so captivated and mesmerized by Mr. Rogers," Hull said. "He may have been one of the only adults many children were able to understand."

The late Fred Rogers, of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood," kept children's attention because he practiced speaking at a rate of about 124 words a minute, Hull said.

The pace may sound awkward, even ridiculous, to adults. But to children accustomed to hearing only bits of sentences or garbled phrases, it is sheer relief.

"In young children, the central nervous system has to mature just like the rest of them. And it does so slowly, over time," Hull said.

The average high-school student processes speech at a rate of about 140 to 145 words per minute, still slower than most adults speak.

"So when an algebra teacher is speaking at 160 or 180 words per minute and is introducing a new math concept ... that is a problem," Hull said.

"Some children's central nervous systems have matured, and they can do it. They can cope. But many can't."

But you're busy, right? You've got a million things to do. You can't slow down.

Consider this example:

A mother races home from work and starts preparing dinner. The kids are home from school and recounting their day. The television is on. The dog is barking.

The mom, amid clanging dishes, hurriedly asks her children to put their backpacks away and set the table and – she slows down for this part – DO IT NOW!

"The child is wondering, `What am I supposed to do right now?'" Hull said.

Mom repeats the order twice, maybe three times. She finally slows down and enunciates because she's frustrated with the kids' vacant stares.

"Anybody who works with children will save a great deal of time if they will simply speak at a rate that children can comprehend," Hull said.

Hockenberry, the preschool teacher, says she has become so accustomed to speaking to toddlers, she continues the slower pace at home with her husband.

"I'll say, `It's time to go' or `Seat belts are safe choices.' And he just gives me this look," she said, laughing.

But chances are, he hears her loud and clear.

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