

Teaching Charlotte spoken language through reading

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Charlotte was born in October 1995, in Christchurch, New Zealand; she is the younger of our two daughters. From birth Charlotte attended the 'Champion Centre' which is a multi therapist clinic based in our home city. The sessions were once weekly and the therapists included music, computer work, speech and language, cognitive development and physiotherapy. Although this support was important to Charlotte and us, we felt that we wanted to extend therapy to help Charlotte in all areas.

The Champion Centre did not support sign language and refused to discuss this option. Charlotte's delayed speech and the frustration she felt in the difficulty of communicating concerned us. By the age of two Charlotte had a vocabulary of 30 to 40 words but could not put two words together. When asked to repeat the phrase, "hello Mummy", she would only say "Mummy". Her comprehension was typically well in advance of her speech and she could recognise 15 letters and all the numbers to 5.

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When Charlotte was aged 2½ we attended the *Asia Pacific Down Syndrome Conference* in Auckland, New Zealand. One of the speakers was Professor Sue Buckley, who we had heard of via articles sent to us by my sister, a paediatric nursing tutor in London. We attended her lecture at the conference plus an extra day's course designed for teachers of children with Down syndrome. We were fascinated with her information but

wondered if it was too good to be true.

On our return home we started the program straight away with Charlotte, which initially were flash cards, (without picture prompts, just text) of words she would use everyday. Within 2 weeks she was matching, selecting and reading eight words of familiar objects e.g. "Mummy", "Daddy", "cat", "cup". She loved the work and would get the word cards out of the cupboard and test herself! Next we introduced simple two word phrases e.g. "Hello Mummy" "Charlotte's drink". Within a few weeks she could repeat the two word phrases and quickly started to create her own like, "T.V. on", "clap hands". We found it easier to make our own flash cards and continued to extend the number of words, until Charlotte had developed a large enough sight recognition vocabulary to move on to books. We visited the library weekly to get early reading books, often just two or four words per page. Charlotte would read these over and over and stunned us with her ability to learn and retain new words.

Her language progressed along with her reading and her grammar continues to improve. Charlotte adores reading and devours books at a great rate.

Charlotte started at our local school six weeks ago with a teacher aide for one-hour morning and afternoon. Her reading ability is the best in the class and this gives her tremendous self-esteem and confidence. We are so thrilled with her progress and are sure the reading program has been invaluable to us.



Charlotte on her 5th birthday

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These descriptions of children's progress all highlight that:

- words children read transfer rapidly to speech
- reading 2 then 3 word 'phrases' transfers their use to speech
- reading sentences teaches grammar
- reading words and sentences develops clearer speech production (articulation and phonology)

Editor