

We are often inclined to take our schools for granted. But that we must never do. When this begins to happen we tend to become less thankful for them. Already in the home we have to emphasize with our children that our schools are a gift of God. It's important that parents pray for the school and its teachers openly and often in front of their children.

*Do you have any advice for our parents today?*

The best advice we can give them is to keep their priorities straight. First things first. They have to be able and ready to deny themselves for Christ's sake and the sake of their children. They have to guard against being overcome by a desire for the pleasures and luxuries of this world. These are greater temptations today than when we were younger.

Parents should take an active part in the schools. They should be willing members of the School Board and the Ladies' Circles. They should attend the P.T.A. meetings, the parent-teacher conferences, and the programs given for their benefit, and visit the school whenever an occasion arises.

Finally, parents should be supportive of their school and their teachers — especially the teachers. They need parental encouragement.



## FEATURE

*Coincidentally, our feature article for this issue is written by Monica Lanting, who calls Mr. and Mrs. Engelsma Grandpa and Grandma. She's the recently married daughter of Lamm and Mary Beth Lubbers, who in turn have figured importantly in the life of our school in South Holland, Illinois. Monica wrote what follows, not as a "Perspectives" article, but as a paper for a college English course a year ago. She was attending Trinity College in Chicago at the time, having spent two years prior to that at Calvin College in Grand Rapids. She wrote an interesting paper on language development, and we're glad for her willingness to make it available for our use on these pages. (The reference to "Austin Dane" in her opening sentence, by the way, is to Dewey and Dena's first great-grandchild.)*

# Out of the Mouth of Babes

Monica Lubbers Lanting

I was struck anew with the miracle of the birth of a child on August 28, 1985, for it was then that my first nephew, Austin Dane, was born. The wonder, however, did not end after he initially entered our lives. Every pound he gains, each second he holds his head up, and especially each and every sound he makes fills me with incredulous awe once again. At first I thought my admiration was due merely to prejudice, but as I researched the topic of language development in the very young child, I discovered that developmental psychologists, linguists, educators, and even reporters stand speechless at the linguistic achievements of a child.

Educational psychologist Ruth Inglis once wrote, "A baby is a helpless explorer in the unknown, more bewildered by stimuli and objects that he does not understand than any moon traveller." He arrives screaming from the womb into a world filled with mysterious sights and sounds. Developmental psychologists agree that in order for the infant to make sense of the new world in

which he has found himself, it is extremely important that he receive verbal stimulation already during the first months of life. The coos and gurgles which prove so endearing to parents and grandparents are essential to the child's future exploration of language. Joan Beck notes, "Linguists say that a baby makes all the basic units of sound in every language on earth during the first year of his life. But eventually, he will discard those which are not part of the language he hears in his home." Statements similar to this one aroused my interest, and during the past several weeks I took special care to babble back at my nephew. He was as delighted as I to imitate the "ohs" and "ahs" I directed to his attentive ears. But far more fascinating was the precision with which he responded. Qualities such as the volume, tone, and even pitch of my voice were echoed almost exactly from his infant lips.

By the time a baby is able to sit up he begins the important task of associating objects with names. Already between the ages

of 12-18 months, the great breakthrough so anxiously awaited by parents, occurs — the child speaks his first words. I suppose every parent and grandparent could rattle off impressive tales concerning the first words of their youngsters. But, what is really incredible is that in just twelve short months a babe has thoroughly organized the concepts of a language within his mind in such a way as to communicate effectively. Anyone who has ever tackled the challenge of learning a second language will appreciate the learning capacity of the developing infant.

Research has shown that the linguistic development of a child is not merely the result of imitation. Perhaps the strongest proof for the cognitive nature of a little one's speech ability is that children in all nations seem to learn their native languages in much the same way. Jerome Bruner writes, "Every language is learnable by children of pre-school age, and it is becoming apparent that little children have definite ideas about how language is structured and for what it can be used." In all cultures the child's first word is generally a noun or a proper noun. I found this interesting because, as we noted in class, when one culture first assimilates words from another culture the first words they usually take are also nouns. The second stage of the

child's linguistic development is characterized by his putting two words together to form rudimentary sentences. The two-word stage seems to be universal.

Children around the globe not only parallel one another's progress, but also appear to do so without being coached in any significant degree by their parents. David Thompson reports, "... coaching has little effect on the acquisition of language. Children from highly literate homes and children from illiterate homes alike seem to master the basic structure of their native tongues at about the same speed. Moreover, they achieve much the same fluency." This is not to say that parental correction, censure, and pronunciation of a child's vocabulary is unimportant. However, parents usually concentrate on teaching their children facts about their environment, and let the child learn the language on his own.

Once, however, the child has a firm grasp of the nouns and verbs, he begins to rely heavily upon parents and teachers for the more subtle components of the language. In his book, *School Can Wait*, Raymond Moore writes, "Early mother-child interaction is an essential factor in a young child's language development, and the quality and consistency of this interaction profoundly affects his communication competence."

Parents and teachers must both know that between the ages of three and six a child's vocabulary will grow explosively — and in imitation of what they hear. If a parent speaks English correctly, his child will also by the end of this period. By the same token, the child will pick up the swear words and pet expressions of his parents and teachers. Art Linkletter illustrates this in his popular compilation of amusing and horribly honest answers given by children during his interviews with them. He records numerous adorable quips in which they imitate and disclose secrets about their parents. One such interview proceeded as follows:

"Do you have any brothers or sisters?"

"No."

"Any plans for any?"

"We're going to have a baby brother."

"How do you know?"

"My dad told me."

"How about your mother?"

"He hasn't told her yet. We're keeping it a secret."

Joan Beck, in describing the method for raising a brighter child, feels that most homes withhold vital linguistic feedback which the fast-growing mind of the young child needs desperately. In an interview with kindergarten teacher and parent Mary Beth Lubbers (my mother), this theory was supported. She indicated

that the parent who serves as a language model and provides verbal stimuli for his child will usually produce children who are in her words, "...ready for school and able to comprehend and associate more difficult concepts than his classmate who has received a more limited vocabulary from his parents." She went on to relate that some parents are afraid to use words that their child will not understand. She remarked, "He'll absorb them gradually and decipher their meaning. After all, that's how he learned to talk originally."

In addition to enhancing a child's vocabulary, adult verbal stimuli have also proven to increase the level of understanding in a child. An important section of Joan Beck's chapter "How to Stimulate the Intellectual Growth of Your Child" revolves around the communication between a parent and his child. Mrs. Lubbers believes that the amount of verbal interaction a child is involved in can also increase the sense of humor of the child. She tells of the child who at the innocent age of two years was given a banana by her mother for the first time. The mother carefully pointed to the piece of fruit and slowly, emphasizing each syllable, said, "Ba-na-na." The little girl burst into a fit of giggles and cried, "I eat my 'na-na'!" The parent was puzzled for a moment

And so researchers continue in their pursuit for a better understanding of the importance of language to the development of a child. But really this should come as no surprise to the Christian parent or to the Christian educator. He knows the words of the Scripture which read, "Train up a child in the way that he should go and when he is old he will not depart from it." Or, in other words,

heavenly Father. Knowing that our words have such a real impact upon the language of children has impressed me with the duty we have to take the little ones of Christ upon our knees and tell them about the wonder of God — and someday they too will stand with the saints of God from every land and tongue, echoing words of praise to the One who created their lips.

## PARENTS' CORNER

*In our last issue we gave in this rubric the first part of Esther Kamps' "parable, whose subject is Christian parents teaching children." The story began, you will remember, with Nathaniel and Jerusha Faithful's being forced off the family farm by a dishonest, godless uncle. They taught their seven children in this instance by their willingness to suffer such a bitter blow with quiet submission to the will of God — even to the point of singing away their tears, in the words of a hymn like "I am a Stranger Here," as they passed the old familiar landmarks of that farm on their way to find a new home. They settled first near a town called Abatoir. They lived there in abject poverty, but were content nevertheless, till the town's only church apostatized to the point of no return. They therefore loaded their few possessions once more on the creaking, old cart and headed towards the mountains, hoping to find shelter in Bacca Valley, where, they had heard, there were still faithful people of God ("Beni") in these "Lastimes." After a long, grueling journey they arrived, in the providence of God, at the door of Isak and Harmony Fountain. There they found not only a place of shelter from the elements, but a spiritual home, in days when the*