

Book Reviews

Speech Development in the Digital Age: Hidden Treasures of the Spoken Word

Rainer Patzlaff (WECAN, 2024)

Reviewed by Jill Taplin

This 30-page booklet is a revised and updated version of *Childhood Falls Silent*, which was published in 1999 in German and then translated and published in English. In the intervening years, not only have we had the Covid-19 pandemic, with consequent disruption to child development, but there has also been an explosion in the prevalence of digital media. The first part of this booklet focuses on the decline in functional literacy which has happened as electronic media use has increased, and on the sharp rise in speech development disorders, said here to be affecting one in three of German pre-schoolers.

We can intuitively connect that the rise in electronic media and the rise in speech developmental disorders are related. It is hard to find well-founded research which links the two directly. However, as Rainer Patzlaff suggests, it is clear that children and their parents are spending more time engaging with screens and that this takes away time from play and conversation, both of which do assuredly support healthy development.

The second part of the booklet I found very engaging. It has some interesting points



about the distinction between genuine human speech and electronically submitted language. When we speak, our whole body, including more than 100 muscles, is involved. This is imitated by the child and this unconscious imitation is what supports the child in learning the art of speaking. Additionally, the production of speech sculpts the air (as do eurythmy movements) and there are some photographs of this dynamic effect. We understand that the unconscious activity of the body shapes the development of the brain. Of course, when speech is electronically reproduced, there

is neither any sculpting of the air nor any micromovements of the body, for the child to imitate, with consequent limitations on brain development.

As stated by Patzlaff, there is no 'I' to connect with the child and no spiritual process takes place: "Electronic speakers lack the human quality that is required to promote child development" (p.23). Patzlaff argues that language and speech are a shared experience of "movement and streaming forms," which offer the child rich layers of experience beyond the words themselves (p.24). This I found a cogent explanation.

In the case of the very young, musicality and formative forces combine with rhythmical repetition to both delight and healthily nourish the child, as we see with well-loved nursery and nonsense rhythms. We do have well-supported research which supports this. By the age of around two years, the physical forces developed by imitating the movement of speech are transformed into forces of imagination and now the imaginative picture created by the words becomes increasingly important. Unlike screen images, it is the child's own inner activity which creates imaginative pictures

from the words which they hear, for example in a told or read fairy tale. Patzlaff describes this as a process where language forms the soul and encourages us to use “imaginative and concrete language” to support healthy soul development. He suggests that we sometimes investigate the etymological origins of words to re-enliven our own language consciousness.

Although I would like to have seen more references to research to support the theory, which seems so intuitive, that increasing digital and electronic experiences and increasing speech development disorders are causally linked, I value this booklet for the account of what the title calls the “hidden treasures of the spoken word.” This is certainly something that can be described and discussed with

parents. Increasingly the parents coming towards us have grown up in an environment filled with electronic experiences and are more and more likely to use digital media as a source of information and entertainment. We need better resources to support them in appropriately protecting and nourishing their children. We cannot condemn them, because digital media exposure is inescapably part of their world, but we do need lively and creative ways of inspiring them to make changes which will benefit their children. This booklet is a useful source, but we need more, in my opinion, to help families make practical changes which will allow the treasures of the spoken word to work their magic on young children. ♦
