



## HEALTH HOTLINE



### **BAYLES FAMILY SPEECH CENTER, LLC**

*By: Denise Favor Bayles*

As a speech-language pathologist, parents frequently ask me about what they should do if they have concerns with their child's communication skills. The most important piece of advice I can share is to "go with your gut." If you have concerns, one option is to seek out a speech and language screening. A screening is a good way to determine if your child presents with any risk factors for speech and language delays. The speech-language pathologist can help you make an informed decision if further testing is warranted. If a more formal evaluation is recommended, you should contact your health insurance carrier and inquire as to your policy's speech and language evaluation and therapy benefits. Always inquire about both your in and out of network benefits. One additional note is that if you have communication concerns, a formal hearing test, completed by an audiologist should be done, just as a precaution.

In addition to private practice and outpatient centers, there are federal and state funded programs available. From birth to three years old, there is "Early Intervention." From three to five years old, your local school district would perform the evaluation, if agreed upon during an evaluation planning meeting. It is important to note both the early intervention and school district programs have eligibility criteria.

An important question to ask if the eligibility criteria were not met for those programs is, "how far from the average range were my child's skills?" Very often, parents think that because their child didn't meet the program's criteria, therapy is not needed. If the program's eligibility criteria were not met, therapy may still be warranted if the child's skills fell below the average range. Make sure you are fully informed and don't be afraid to ask questions. Be sure

your child's test results are explained so that you understand the strengths, as well as the weaknesses, if there were any.

In terms of actual development, here are some important guidelines to keep in mind. Imitation skills are one of the first stages in speech and language development. Imitation movements in play are as important as imitating words. A firm foundation of play skills, also known as "prelinguistic play" is vital to speech and language development. Toys that can be manipulated, such as pop-up boxes or shape sorters, and pretend play items, such as a farm with animals or dolls with feeding and other accessories are fantastic for language development. Puzzles are another great way to address beginning play and problem solving skills. Start with puzzles where your child needs to match the pieces to the corresponding pictures in a form board. Many of these puzzles also have small pegs for the children to pick up. This is a great way to start supporting fine motor skills, as those skills are important for communicating with pointing before words develop. By one year old, first words should be emerging. By fifteen to eighteen months of age, children should be imitating speech sounds frequently and making more approximations of "real" words. By two years of age, children should have about fifty words they use on their own and be starting to combine those words into simple phrases. Skills should expand and consistently progress from there with sentence length increasing, grammatical forms emerging, being increasingly understood by others, and following directions with an increasing number of steps. Remember, you are your child's best advocate. If you have concerns, seek out a speech-language pathologist who will answer your communication questions.