

Module: **Communication and Emergent Literacy:
Early Intervention Issues**

Session 1: Overview of Communication and Literacy

Video Transcript: Millie Smith—Quality of Life and Emergent Literacy CL 1-05

EIVI Training Center. (2005). Millie Smith—Quality of life and emergent literacy [Video clip]. (Available from Early Intervention Training Center for Infants and Toddlers With Visual Impairments, FPG Child Development Institute, CB #8040, UNC, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-8040)

Narrator

Millie Smith, a teacher of children with visual impairments and consultant, sits in an office.

Millie Smith

A lot of people, I think, don't realize how soon in an individual's life literacy starts. And I would argue that literacy starts at birth because the foundation of literacy is social skills and then building on social skills, communication skills. And there are certain sort of fundamental things about the way we interact with infants, toddlers, young children, that just determine what the, the, receptivity is going to be for information in that individual. And one of the ways that I like to think about it is from the point of view of quality of life. And quality of life is an essential issue for any human being at any stage of their development, but if it doesn't receive a lot of attention in the very first months, even weeks, not to mention years, of a person's existence, there's an awful lot of backtracking and doing over and straightening out that has to happen.

So one of the first things that my colleagues and I did, knowing that this was such a hugely important issue, was try to find out, uh, try to find a definition of quality of life. And we literally did, we formed a study group and did a search of all of the literature in the fields of education and special education and sensory loss and sensory impairments that we could comb through. We had ERIC searches and DB Link searches and all kinds of things to help us. And we literally didn't find anything that even came close to a definition of quality of life. So we didn't know how, the issue we were trying to answer was, what are the skills we need to teach early in life related to quality of life—that set a person up to have the kind of social and communication skills they need to go on and become literate and a lot of other things? We didn't know what kind of skills to address because we couldn't find a definition of quality of life.

So finally we found one. It was a suggestion from, actually it came from the spouse of one of the people in our study groups. It was a psychologist, and he said, "Have you read the work of a psychologist named Daniel Stern?" Dr. Daniel Stern, he's a developmental psychologist, and he wrote a book, a fascinating book called *The Neurodevelopmental*, uh, the, *The Neurodevelopment of the Young Child**. And we looked in that material, and we actually found what was a, an extremely cogent and simple definition of quality of life. And that's what we used to then go through curriculum and look at skills that were the most related to the quality of life as Dr. Stern defined it. And his definition, I think it's something that everybody can relate to pretty easily.

He said there are essentially three things that every human being needs in order to have a high quality of life. And the three things are agency, anticipation, and participation. And I'll give you the short definition of each of those. That terminology is a little different than what we usually use in our day-to-day language, although you'll quickly understand how it relates to it.

Agency is the ability to control some people and some things. And what Dr. Stern is saying is as early in the development of the young child, as soon as possible, that they can come to understand that their behavior can control some people and can control some events, the more confident, the more agency they have, the confident they are, and the more willing they are to reach out and interact with their environments and the people and the objects in their environments. So that's agency.

The second one is anticipation, and anticipation is having something to look forward to with pleasure. And what Dr. Stern argues is that nobody is capable of having a high quality of life without something pleasurable to look forward to, and certainly it's an integral part of the experience of any young child, any infant, that really what their, what their, what their awareness of being in this world consists of, is anticipation of that next thing, that being comforted, that being fed, that whatever it is, and that those things have to be available to that child on a pretty consistent basis in order for them to be able to anticipate that it's coming again, and that's what anticipation is. Things, something wonderful might happen but it's not, it doesn't add to your quality of life unless you know it's going to happen and you are looking forward to it. That's the quality of life issue.

And then the third thing is participation, and that's simply somebody to do things with. And that's kind of an interesting one because there are probably more individual differences related to participation than there are to the other two. And it seems as though individuals, people really come into the world with kind of a different need for social contact. And nobody knows whether that's innate or not, but certainly by the first few months of life some of us need more participation with other people and some of us don't need quite so much. And knowing what the, what the need for participation is for a given young child, infant, baby, is very, very, crucial to their quality of life early in life.

So I think that the easiest way to relate to these three quality-of-life issues and appreciate how significant and how important they are in all of our lives is to think about what we do to punish people, to lower a person's quality of life, what we do is in one way or another is to take away agency, anticipation, and participation. And so if you think about, for instance, the penal system, the first thing we do so somebody who is in jail is take away as much of their agency as we possibly can. And so they no longer have a right to control who they share their room with, when they eat, when they shower, what they eat. We take away their control of events and people. We take away their agency, and people find that very, very, very difficult to deal with, and, um, children are always at risk for not having enough agency. They're probably the most at-risk segment of the population for not having enough agency by virtue of the fact that they're little, and people can physically make them do anything they, they, want to for a long period of time, and they're really in their early experience. Knowing how important it is for, as soon as possible, as immediately possible, to, a simple example would be to offer the bottle and wait for the child to look at it and then respond by giving it to him. That gives an infant agency. Compare to, that to the difference of picking up the child, taking the bottle, and just pushing it into his mouth. So, agency issues.

Similarly when we want to punish an adult, and you want to take away anticipation, and what we do is take away privileges, and we do this with our teenagers and everybody. We do this with young children in school, too. Everybody knows this phenomenon of being punished by having what you look forward to taken away from you. And that's why it's punishment. You look forward to it. You really want it. And it's, it's very difficult to deal with if you don't get at least some of those things that you are looking forward to. What's horrible is when people, when people are in a situation where nobody is going to the trouble to make sure that they have something to look forward to available to them.

And unfortunately we know there, there are children in this situation where they're in a school where there's a very rigid curriculum for instance, and they really desperately want to be learning about *this* but the teacher has decided they're going to learn about *that*. And they don't have the opportunity to look forward to and anticipate with pleasure the things that they most want to participate in and, and be involved with. We'll have to make sure that that doesn't happen, that children have what I call the two and two rule, that at the very minimum, there are two absolutely wonderful, outstandingly wonderful things that they have to look forward to every morning and every afternoon at the very least. And hopefully it will be a whole lot more than that. So that's anticipation.

Participation, the most severe punishment any human being can experience is, uh, well, if you are in a prison system it's probably solitary confinement, sensory deprivation, lack of participation, isolation. And I think that for young children with sensory loss, the assumption is made very often that because a human being, another person is somewhere in the house, somewhere else in the room, somewhere around, that that's close enough and that's enough proximity and that's enough closeness. It usually isn't.

It usually isn't for any child but especially not for a child with a sensory loss. Participation doesn't just mean the physical presence of another person. Participation means the presence of another person who's doing something with you, who's sharing something with you, who's interacting with you. And nobody can pull that off one hundred percent of the time. So again we have to look at what the social need of the child is and try to match that as much as we can. Of course parents have to go off and cook and vacuum and wash clothes and do all of the other things that they have to do. But if they can do those things and come back and spend 5, 10 minutes playing and sharing and interacting with the child, that's usually enough. Without the direct interaction piece of it, the quality of life is impaired.

*The complete and accurate reference for the book discussed by Millie Smith is listed below.

Stern, D.N. (2000). *The interpersonal world of the infant: A view from psychoanalysis and developmental psychology*. New York: Basic Books.