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The Importance of Prosody

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What is prosody?

Erica ordered a hamburger... is that a sentence or a question? Are you sure? What if you knew that Erica was a vegetarian and you weren't sure if you heard correctly that she had ordered a hamburger? Wouldn't you ask in disbelief, "Erica ordered a *hamburger*?" In this example, words are not enough to figure out the meaning. We need something more. We need *prosody*. *Prosody* refers to the set of variables in speech that affect how a message is communicated and understood. Prosody includes:



- **Rhythm** – the flow of connected speech that comes from the combination of stressed words, unstressed words, and pauses in a phrase or sentence. A steady, unvarying rhythm makes speech sound unnatural and robotic.



- **Loudness** – the amount of volume used when speaking. Whispering requires very little volume while shouting requires considerably more volume.



- **Stress** – the force or emphasis used on a sound, syllable, or word in comparison to other sounds, syllables, or words. A stressed syllable in a word has more emphasis than other syllables in the word.



- **Speed** – the pace of speech, or how fast or slow we speak. A fast rate of speech can have a negative effect on a listener's ability to understand the message we are trying to communicate.



- **Pitch** – the degree of highness or lowness in a person's voice. Men usually have a low pitch while women and children tend to have higher-pitched voices.



- **Intonation** – the rise and fall in pitch that occurs when we are speaking. We often use a rising pitch when we ask a yes/no question.

Does Prosody Really Matter?

Yes! Not only does prosody help us differentiate questions from sentences (as in the example in the first paragraph), but it also helps us to recognize a speaker's emotional state (through his/her "tone" of voice), clarify communication (e.g., "I asked for the *time* – not a *dime*"), understand sarcasm... and the list goes on! Prosody (like language) is usually acquired naturally as children grow and listen to prosody being modeled around them. However some individuals such as those with Childhood Apraxia of Speech, Autism, cochlear implants, Alzheimer's, and Parkinson's may need assistance in learning to use prosody appropriately.



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What Can I Do?

Here are some activities you can use to work on prosody:

- **Read or Tell Stories** – Using character voices gives you an opportunity to try lower pitches, higher pitches, louder voices, and softer voices. For example, in *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*, use a low, loud voice for Papa Bear and a high, soft voice for Baby Bear.



- **Sing Songs or Tell Rhymes** – Music and rhymes are great ways to work on rhythm. In addition, if you sing a song that repeats itself (such as *The Song That Never Ends* or *Be Kind to Your Web-footed Friends*) you can practice loudness, speed, and pitch by singing the verses softer, louder, slower, faster, higher, or lower.



- **Play a Game of “Copycat”** – Have your child imitate phrases or sentences that you say or read from a newspaper (or other type of written material). Say or read the phrases/sentences using different intonation and stress patterns.



- **Ask and Answer “WH” Questions** – Say a simple sentence such as: “Jimmy washed his dog.” Then ask simple “WH” questions that can be answered by repeating the sentence while stressing different words in the sentence. For example, “Who washed his dog?” “Jimmy washed his dog.” “What did Jimmy do to his dog?” “Jimmy washed his dog.” “What did Jimmy wash?” “Jimmy washed his dog.”



- **“What Does It Mean?”** – Think of a simple sentence such as: “I didn’t take your pencil.” Have your child think about and describe how the meaning changes when different words in the sentence are stressed. For example, if I said “I didn’t take your pencil,” that suggests that someone else did. If I said “I *didn’t* take your pencil,” that implies that I did something else to your pencil. If I said “I didn’t take *your* pencil,” that indicates that I took someone else’s pencil. And if I said “I didn’t take your *pencil*,” that hints that I took something else that belonged to you.



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