

Is That My Baby Talking?!

By Judy D'Mello

We've all been guilty of staring at our pre-verbal infant, wishing we could fast forward to the day when parent and child could actually engage in conversation — when playtime promises to be a little more exciting than watching baby swat a dangling Elmo. After all, as delicious as a newborn is, interacting with one can be about as stimulating as a cup of chamomile tea.

Not necessarily, says **Stephanie Sigal**, founder of an innovative new program called *Say and Play*, which teaches parents of children aged birth-4 years how to create a productive, more rewarding play experience. By learning to maximize a child's communication skills, (yes, even infants possess these), playtime, according to Sigal, can be filled with fun, love and learning.

Sigal, a New York licensed speech pathologist, came up with the idea for her program while working with New York City families. "I noticed a disconnection between parents and children," she says, observing that many parents rarely knew how to interact and play with their children, or how to encourage a child's communication. Pregnant with her first child, Sigal, 32, decided it was time to launch a customized program. In April 2004, when her son was 7 months old, she established her company, promising to teach parents how to function as their child's own speech therapist.

She begins with a two-hour evaluation at the family's home. Sigal arrives with a bag full of age-appropriate toys and learning tools, which she uses to assess the child, as well as to demonstrate to parents how these tools can make playtime a magical experience.

After drawing up a plan to foster optimal interaction, Sigal schedules a meeting with parents or caregiver. Families are guided on which toys and books to purchase, either online or in stores, and coached on how to use them effectively. New parents are

armed with practical, fun and inventive ways to play with an infant. Sigal demonstrates the benefits of toys that require adult/child interaction versus those designed for solo play. Drawing from 11 years of experience in the field, Sigal offers parents a crash course in improving speech, language, critical thinking and social skills.

Client Nina Whitman says Sigal showed her "how to make everyday, routine activities a chance to incorporate language learning."

Debbie Horowitz says she was frustrated by her daughter's one-word answers. "I wanted to expand her vocabulary," says the Manhattan mother of two. "I met (Sigal) a couple of years earlier when she worked with my older son on articulation issues. After that I paid more attention to my daughter's speech." Even though there were no signs of developmental problems with her 2-year-old daughter, Horowitz wanted Sigal to meet her, and was delighted to learn about *Say and Play*.

"Why not have a professional select the most appropriate toys for my child?" Horowitz asks. "Why not have that professional recommend what books to read, songs to sing, and specific activities that are centered around play? Like all parents, I want the best for my children."

Sigal instructed Horowitz to replace simple board books, often with one or two words per page, with longer stories to help prolong her daughter's attention span and introduce more words into the girl's vocabulary.

Sigal also helped Horowitz pick out a toy kitchen set and suggested games for mother and daughter to play around the plastic kitchen. In the month since their initial meeting, Horowitz has noticed a sharp decline in one-word answers. Most of all, the full-time mother found that playtime with her daughter was more dynamic than ever.

Still, isn't monosyllabic dialogue the prerogative of every 2-year-old? And even though she's not yet chatty, isn't her brain soaking up the words, storing them in a giant internal lexicon, waiting until she is ready to use them? Is *Say and Play* simply a service that caters to competitive Manhattan parents striving to produce children more precocious than the next?

"Well," laughs Sigal, who spent six years on staff at Duke University and NYU Medical Centers, "I don't think I could have started this company anywhere but in New York City. Parents everywhere want their children to be the best they can be, but *Say and Play* works so perfectly in Manhattan because New York City parents have such drive to have their children exceed certain educational standards."

Her program, she admits, has become part of a "secret plan" for some parents to get their child into the best preschool.

However, a disclaimer on the company's website states that *Say and Play* does not guarantee language progress or that children will want to engage in play with their parents and/or the selected tools."

Preschool acceptance was far from Jodi Wiseman's



Stephanie at work with young client, Jordan.

mind when she sought Sigal's counsel earlier this year. Eight months pregnant, Wiseman, a speech therapist for adult stroke patients and trauma victims, says it was important for her husband, a cardiologist, to learn how to interact with their new baby. The *Say and Play Expectant Parents Program* was a perfect way for the couple to prepare themselves for making playtime more effective and fun.

"Everyone thinks, 'Oh, newborns are so cute,'" says Wiseman. "But there's so much more to them. Just because they're lying around doing nothing doesn't mean you can't interact with them and increase their alertness and awareness."

Sigal provided Wiseman and her husband with a comprehensive list of toys and books, games to play, and the best songs to sing. She discussed the importance of simple fingerplay, of holding on to a baby's gaze, and even downtime. Sigal taught the couple how babies learn language and about initial communication skills, offering a variety of suggestions on how to entice a baby to pay attention and stay focused longer.

After giving birth to a boy in August, Wiseman says she thought Sigal's advice was invaluable. "My husband benefited the most from *Say and Play*, probably because he's not as intuitive when it comes to babies," she explains.

He wasn't the only one to profit. "Everyone says my son is extremely alert for a newborn," Wiseman adds.

Of course parents want their children to be articulate and bright. We'd all love to use valuable playtime in a more efficient manner. But here's a riddle for those parents who think *Say and Play* is a sure means for their child to end up at Harvard: What do Albert Einstein, mathematical genius Ramanujan, and Benito Mussolini have in common?

They all began speaking after they turned 3.

For more information including rates for *Say and Play Kids Program* (birth through age 4), *Expectant Parents and Caregiver Programs*, visit www.sayandplayfamily.com or call (646) 295-4473.



Stephanie Sigal, with son, Rami