The Errors Children Make

Imagine that you have just picked up your three and a half year child from preschool. She gets in the car and without you asking she is very anxious to tell you what had happened at school that day. "Mommy, mommy," she says, "I holded a big snake at school today!" A few different reactions run through your mind as you listen to the excitement in her voice. First, you are thrilled that she is enjoying school. Second, you wonder why there was a big snake in the classroom. And finally, your ears register the fact that she had uttered an ungrammatical sentence: "I holded a big snake." For a moment you wonder if this grammatical error is important.

It turns out that this grammatical error is important but not because it is a mistake, or is wrong, or would be marked incorrect on some test. The error is important because it is an indication of how smart your child is. Your child has figured out a general rule of the language system: add the suffix, -ed, to words in order to express past tense. Your child had some meaning she wanted to express – "I did something in the past" - and she filtered that meaning through her present understanding of the language system and expressed the result. What she hasn't figured out yet is that there are some exceptions to the rule, what we know as irregular verbs, but over time she will develop an understanding of those rules as well.

Our everyday understanding of an *error* is that it is something to be avoided, that in some way it is a failure on our part. Some of the errors or mistakes we make are a result of our being careless or inattentive. This can also be true for children. But many of the errors committed by children are not the result of carelessness or ignorance but are the result of very active minds trying to figure out how some aspect of the world works. You might say that these are errors of *theory* rather than *performance*.

A child who is failing at building a tall tower of blocks because he keeps putting the small blocks at the bottom of the tower and the bigger and wider blocks up higher isn't failing just because he is careless. His *theory* of block building doesn't yet include an understanding of size relationships and the effects of gravity. A year later, when he can construct very tall and stable towers quickly and

without any apparent thought, he will be demonstrating his knowledge of those relationships. Returning to the child who *holded* the big snake, six months later she will demonstrate her more complex *theory* of creating past tense when she comes home from school and tells her mother, "I *held* a green frog in school today!"

How should parents and teachers respond to the *theory errors* that children make? Once we understand what is going on it's hard not to respond with respect and wonder at how children naturally figure out how the world works and the ways in which the *errors* they make give us an insight into their thinking. We can help them develop their *theories* by responding to the *meaning* of what they are trying to do, whether it is constructing sentences or building towers. The mother listening to her child talk about holding the snake, for example, typically doesn't correct the grammar of the sentence but responds to what the child was saying: "How big was the snake you held in school today?" The mother is showing an interest in her child's excitement and at the same time is modeling the correct grammatical construction. By responding this way, the mother is providing a little more data for her child to use as she continues to develop a theory of how the language system works.

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