

# Finding the Words

*Below: Children learn words and come to understand how their meanings change in different contexts.*



# Programs Aimed at Fostering Language Development in Homeless Children

by Anita Bushell



Four-year-old Katy smiles as she spreads her beach blanket. She sits down, flips off her shoes, and looks at a book with her bear.

The dramatic-play corner of The Ark, a one-room preschool in Baltimore, looks like that of any other classroom for young children. There is a dress-up bin from which Katy extracts a pair of bright, purple slippers. “Do we wear slippers at the beach or do we wear sandals?” a teacher asks.

Developing appropriate language skills is a top priority at The Ark, because the students are being groomed to enter the Baltimore City public-school system. They are also homeless.

“I believe that these skills are critical for all children and are of particular importance for the transient population that we serve at The Ark,” says the program’s director, Nancy E. Newman. She adds that language skills, which children develop largely in the crucial preschool years, “are not the focus of adult attention while their families are in crisis.”

Ms. Newman (as the children call her), a licensed social worker, leads a team that includes four teachers, a speech therapist, a part-time family-services coordinator, and prescreened “language volunteers,” because the children the program serves—up to 20 per day—need additional one-on-one support in basic communication skills. “We can increase vocabulary for educational outcomes,” Ms. Newman explains, and “for social relationships.”

Such an increase is a daily goal at The Ark, because teachers find that students entering the program often don’t know “universal” words, such as “spoon” or “plate.” They often don’t know the names of basic body parts, such as “head” or “neck.” “Who can tell me what this is?” Ms. Tonya, a teacher, asks the children during circle time while pointing to her elbow, then her wrist.

The development of language skills begins at birth, and research has shown that later reading delays can often be attributed to insufficient linguistic stimulation. Shelly Chabon of Portland State University, currently president of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA), says that in ASHA’s view, “programs designed to help homeless children with ... language facilitation can serve an important and needed role in the community.”

“That’s where we step in,” says Ms. Newman, who asks Katy for help in sticking a new student’s name label in her cubby. “I tell parents, ‘Your kids learn to read the words they know.’” The children are thus coached throughout the morning in simple communications skills, being told, for example, “Use words.”

Language development at The Ark, though, goes beyond everyday vocabulary building; it stresses contextually appropriate usage as well. Katy, who has been in the program since March, places a stethoscope on Mr. Bryan’s arm. Another girl uses the syringe on his cheek. “Did you get a shot in your face?” Mr. Bryan asks. “Give me a shot in my arm!”

Ms. Newman recounts how the children once ate bananas for snack; a few weeks later they didn’t remember what “bananas” were. Such episodes bear out researchers’ findings that in order to increase vocabulary, children need constant practice of and exposure to words—in addition to an understanding that words can appear in differing contexts. During circle time, Ms. Tonya reads *The Great Wave* and discusses the difference between an aquatic wave, a “hello” wave, and a wave at an Orioles game.

The Ark, a program of the Episcopal Community Services of Maryland, has served homeless children since 1990; it has evolved into a preschool for three- and four-year-olds focusing

on school readiness. Partnering with Head Start, which funds one of The Ark’s teaching positions, the preschool works to ensure that children are “expressive, curious, and ready to learn” when they enter kindergarten. The Ark has been accredited through the Maryland State Department of Education since 2007. Other preschool programs for homeless children around the country include Morningsong Early Learning Center, in Seattle; Horizons for Homeless Children, in Boston; the Bessie Pregeron Child Development Center, in Los Angeles; the Compass Children’s Center, in San Francisco; House of Tiny Treasures, in Houston; and Miami-Dade CAA Head Start/Early Head Start.

“The Ark preschool is a place of stability, learning and healthy food for Baltimore’s most vulnerable and at-risk young children,” says Mark Furst, president and CEO of United Way of Central Maryland. “While their families are under enormous stress, looking for permanent housing and work, children at The Ark have normalcy in their lives that allows them to continue their learning and stay healthy. It helps ensure they will have the skills needed to succeed in elementary school and beyond in preparation for a self-sufficient life.”

Licensed to serve 20 students daily, The Ark takes in as many as 75 annually, with an average stay of anywhere from one day to 16 weeks. Ms. Newman, who has been with The Ark for 11 years,

started out as the program’s social-services coordinator. She has been the director since 2003. The “revolving” nature of the program, she says, is a challenge. The preschool years are when youngsters start to build trust and form bonds with peers, which they cannot do if they stay in settings only temporarily.

Another challenge is coaching families in effective communication skills. Daily attendance, with exceptions for illness, is required, and any family that neither brings their child nor calls with an explanation three times in a 30-day period is given a warning that they



*Left: A young student enjoys the learning process. Right: A boy masters an essential skill.*

are in danger of being removed from the program and placed back on the waiting list. “This is not a drop-in center,” Ms. Newman tells parents, “this is a school.”

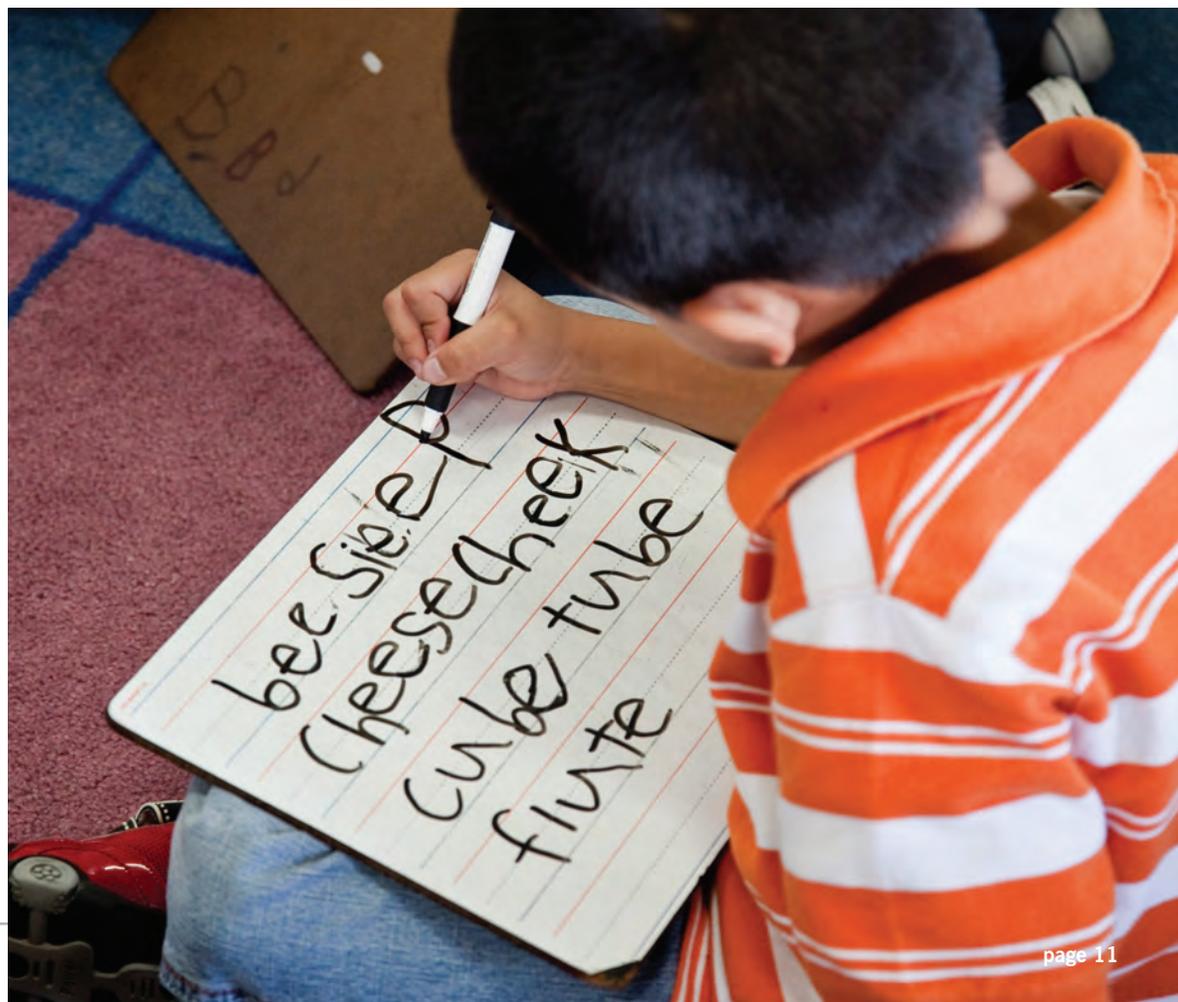
That said, Ms. Newman will provide bus passes, alarm clocks, and a lot of time to help families correct whatever problems they are having, so that their children can benefit from the program daily. Having a consistent arrival time is crucial for children like Mike, who comes in today later than the other children, at 11:15. Mike’s family recently obtained housing a good distance away from The Ark; his mother asked if he could remain at the school for the summer before transitioning to a permanent Head Start program in the fall, and because of the travel time involved, he is allowed to arrive late. When Mike, a middle sibling, entered the program in September 2011, he was living with his mother and two brothers in a city shelter. The mental-health consultant who works with Head Start and The Ark found that he had speech and language delays and was emotionally unstable. As a result, he attends weekly play-therapy sessions and has had an Individualized Education Program (IEP)—a special-education program available through public schools—developed to address his speech and language needs.

Working with families is part of The Ark’s effort to create a community built on trust and on a concern for the whole of the students’ lives. Beyond educating children, Ms. Newman helps homeless families gain access to resources they need when they get back on their feet. The Ark relies on a range of community resources, such as donations of linens and cooking supplies, as well as help from a youth-group program that provides cleaning supplies for families moving into permanent housing.

While The Ark supports families, it also receives support of various kinds from local institutions. “Service learning” partnerships, which take place with Loyola University Maryland, allow the university students to teach and interact with children from The Ark as part of Loyola’s undergradu-

ate curriculum. Even local seventh-grade girls from the private Garrison Forest School are recruited to support learning at The Ark, with adult supervision. The Garrison Forest relationship has resulted in a new collaboration: in September 2012, through Garrison Forest’s ties to the Irvine Nature Center, students at The Ark began making monthly visits to the center to get exposure to more science- and nature-based learning.

Suzanne, whose son, A.K., was in the program for a year and a half and is now in first grade, says that The Ark taught A.K. “about sharing.” She adds, “It is a very versatile program and was a big stepping stone for A.K. The Ark got the children ready for learning—moving up in the world.” There are, she says, “a lot of nationalities” represented at the school, which taught A.K. “about different people on a different level; he learned to say his numbers in Spanish.” The Ark, Suzanne notes, “was more to me than a typical preschool. They helped my child and they helped my family; they did something for Christmas and for Mother’s Day; they provided food and coats, free trips; there were computers set up for the parents. But it wasn’t only about the resources—they were 150% supportive of the family; so many things they did for the kids. They taught A.K. to accept people for who they were no matter where they came from . . . A.K. didn’t want to leave—he was excited to go to school in the morning. I’ve recommended that program to



many families.” Ms. Newman, Suzanne says, “is one of my mentors; I love her.”

A typical day at the The Ark begins with Mr. Bryan or Ms. Jasmine picking up children in a van from several local shelters. When they arrive their hands are slathered with Purell hand sanitizer, and they eat breakfast—cereal with milk—at two large tables. The meal serves as an opportunity to practice language skills. Ms. Tonya asks one of the boys, “Would you like some more?” He nods. “Can I have some words, please?” she responds, then elaborates, “May I have some more cereal, please?”

Ms. Newman notes that all entering children are screened with the Early Screening Inventory—Revised (ESI), used in many preschools, to determine if there is a need for more in-depth evaluations. In 2005, because of challenges Ms. Newman and her staff were facing, she raised a question at the first annual Young Children Without Homes Conference, in Boston, sponsored by Horizons for Homeless Children: “How are you assessing your children when they come and go so quickly?” Ms. Newman and her team of teachers have since developed an assessment system, the “Child Development Data Sheet,” used in conjunction with ESI, that expands and customizes linguistic evaluation for the specific needs of the transient children at The Ark. The children are assessed regularly; questions are based on developmentally appropriate language and range from the basic (can the child identify his or her ears?) to the more complex (can the child repeat an eight-syllable sentence: “There are five boys and three girls here?”). “I want to see vocabulary growth by the second assessment,” says Ms. Newman.

That approach supports linguistic learning for children like Caty, who is the middle sibling of three children living with their mother in shelter-supported housing. Their father lives elsewhere but is involved in their care. Caty struggled with separation in the beginning of her stay at The Ark, but after a period of adjustment, she began to participate in all activities and even started talking quietly to teachers on a one-to-one basis.

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### ***Language development begins at birth, and studies have traced reading delays to insufficient language stimulation.***

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While Caty’s assessments displayed developmentally appropriate skills, children exhibiting language or speech delays are referred for further evaluation to The Ark’s on-site speech pathologist, who is grant-funded (initially by the United Way). This streamlines the process of delivering services if a child is deemed eligible for an IEP. If other delays are suspected,

students are evaluated through Head Start. Ms. Newman continually tries to track children so they don’t get “lost” in the Baltimore City social-services system. “Our challenge is to monitor children in order to make a difference,” she says.

After breakfast, a cart is wheeled in with Dixie cups that contain dabs of bright pink toothpaste. “Tooth-brushing time” occurs daily, in addition to twice-monthly dental screenings and fluoride treatments conducted through the Baltimore City Health Department. (As a result of the Deamonte Driver case, the state of Maryland created Healthy Teeth, Healthy Kids, a program funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, to educate low-income and homeless families on the importance of regular dental care. Deamonte, age 12, died in 2007 from a brain infection, a result of a tooth abscess. His mother had neither the money nor the dental coverage to have the tooth pulled.) Bottled water arrives, as well, because tap water at Johnston Square Elementary School, where The Ark is located, is not potable—it’s laced with lead.

Ark children also receive regular hearing and vision screenings and are eligible for medical assistance through Medicaid. According to a report prepared by the Minneapolis-based nonprofit organization Family Housing Fund, “Homeless children consistently exhibit more health problems than housed poor children.” Ms. Newman regularly talks to parents about the importance of consulting a primary-care physician, rather than going to the emergency room, for medical care.

After tooth-brushing time the children gather on the rug to look at books—some on their own, some in the laps of teachers and volunteers. The classroom fills with adult voices reading titles such as *There Was an Old Lady Who Swallowed a Fly* while children answer questions posed to them, such as “Do you see the spider?” or “What color is the bird?” Repeated exposure to books throughout the morning supports literacy learning for The Ark’s children, who, as Ms. Newman states, are “doubly segregated by poverty and homelessness.” There are approximately 1,860 to 3,700 homeless young children in the Baltimore area who do not have access to high-quality early child care.

During circle time, Ms. Tonya reminds the children that they have learned a new word: “When earth and sky meet: horizon. Say ‘horizon.’” Before the children line up to go to the playground, she instructs them to tell a teacher or volunteer when they have found the horizon outside. She also holds up a poster showing a seascape: there are clams, crabs, and a sailboat. “See the horizon?” she asks.

Citizenship skills are promoted throughout the day. Ms. Tonya holds up a bottle of soap bubbles. “Do we fight over bubbles? No, we *share*.”



*Eating healthy food is part of the day's activities at The Ark.*

Outside, the early-July sun beats down on a blacktop surrounded by brick walls. There are no trees. Across the street are boarded-up row houses. As the children play, Ms. Newman describes a documentary called *The Tradesmen: Making An Art of Work*, which focuses on Baltimore painters, carpenters, and welders to illustrate the change from a labor force that worked with its hands to one that is service-based—a change that has resulted in the demise of the working middle class. The loss of jobs, in addition to housing foreclosures and other obstacles to making ends meet in the current economy, has contributed to the rise of the “new” homeless: not “bag ladies” or unkempt men but whole families unable to support themselves. Watching the students blow bubbles, Ms. Newman reflects on solutions to this enormous and growing crisis. “The potential is here,” she says. “This is where we should be putting our energy: into children.” Ms. Newman also wants to educate younger generations about the realities of the “new” homeless: “I want to work with college-age students; soon they are going to become voters and choose careers. I want them to understand they can put leaders in office who will care.”

Johnston Square Elementary, built in 1963, has served as The Ark’s home since October 2011, when the program itself became homeless. The Ark lost its former home, in a community facility owned by the Greater Baltimore Medical Center,

when the building was put up for sale. At Johnston Square the halls are empty (there is no summer program), and it is very quiet, save for the lively sounds emanating from The Ark classroom; the program is administered from a cramped office. “This is not ideal,” Ms. Newman admits. “We had room to spread out in our old space.”

Back in the classroom, the children are instructed to sit on the rug once more. Ms. Tonya waits for the children to settle down. “Remember, we talk about being a good listener,” she says.

“Should we sing to the sun again”—the question refers to “Mr. Sun,” the song the children sang earlier in the morning—“or has he had enough?” Ms. Tonya asks. “He’s had enough!” the students answer loudly. The lyrics to “Mr. Sun” are printed on a large piece of poster board (which also has an illustration of a warm, yellow

sun) so children can make the connection between the letters in front of them and the words they sing. Other “environmental print” includes a picture representing changing seasons (“We love spring!”), images and labels of fruit, and the lyrics to “Over in the Meadow.” Literacy is also supported at the writing table where Caty drew earlier with a fat, beginner pencil while wearing fake-fur gloves from the dress-up bin. Caty’s “shyness limits her interaction with others,” Ms. Newman states, “but with the consistent routine offered at The Ark, she is slowly becoming more comfortable and participating more.”

Mike lies on the rug and plays with two long blocks. Another child wants to play as well. “He’s having some time to transition,” Mr. Bryan tells the child, referring to Mike, who arrived late. Such individual attention helps children who may not be able to simply jump into the group dynamic.

At The Ark there is a poster pinned to a wall, *My School Pledge*:

*Today in school I will  
Listen to my teachers ...  
Be kind to others ...  
Do my very best.*

In the circle, Ms. Tonya announces, “Tomorrow is the Fourth of July; our country is celebrating its freedom.” Tomorrow, she tells the children, there will be no school.

“My mommy’s going to be angry!” one child announces. ■