



48 months *to* 60 months

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT & LITERACY

How are children learning language?

Introduction

How do children learn language and begin to understand reading and writing?

- Around 5 years old, children are able to communicate their ideas and feelings, ask and answer questions, and understand what is said to them. They are able to talk in some detail about things that happened in the past and that will happen in the future.
- They can participate in extended conversations with others, responding appropriately and staying on topic most of the time.
- They can tell stories and relate sequences of events. They are usually able to distinguish between imaginary and real events in their stories.
- At around 5 years old, children like to play with the sounds of words, making up silly rhymes. They also like to make up “nonsense” words and sometimes experiment with “potty” language.
- At around 5 years old, many children can recognize letters and are beginning to copy or write them. Many learn to write their names and begin to recognize some favorite words. They are interested in drawing and writing, and many can copy words if you write them first.
- Around 5 years old, children also pretend to read books, may recognize specific words and may memorize the story as well as familiar songs.



Bilingual Language Development

How do children in bilingual or non-English-speaking families learn language?

- Young children are very skilled at learning language and have the ability to learn two or more languages even before they begin school.
- Families who speak a language other than English at home can use their home language as their primary language with children. Learning their home language helps children feel connected to their family and culture. They can learn English at the same time if the family is bilingual or they can learn English when they begin childcare or school.
- Families support language learning by talking, reading and singing to their children in their home language. In this way children learn many words and language skills that will help them when they begin learning English.
- Check with your local library for books in your home language.
- Children who have this opportunity to become bilingual at an early age will benefit from the use of both languages throughout their lives.

Listening and Speaking

How do speaking and listening help a child learn language?

Using language and engaging in conversation are very important first steps to learning to read and to school success. The more words children hear and the bigger their vocabularies, the better they do in school. Children are eager learners of language and are fascinated with the power of language

- to communicate their needs, feelings and ideas,
- to share their personal experience with others,
- to make things happen,
- to get and give information,
- to solve problems and explore ideas,
- to help them make connections with people,
- to create and tell their stories,



- to make plans for things they want to do, and
- to persuade others or argue their point.

Children learn language by listening, talking, practicing new words, and being listened to and responded to. Children learn more words when you use new words with them. Families have many, many everyday opportunities to help children learn language.

Reading

How do children learn to read?

- When you read with children you begin to open up whole new worlds for them. Reading allows them to learn about a powerful form of communication and gives them access to all kinds of information.
- Most children love to share a book with a family member. Reading to your child is one of the most important things you can do to help them learn to read and to be successful in school.
- Reading doesn't just happen with books. Children are fascinated with signs, labels, instructions, notes, letters, and emails. Learning the many uses there are for reading helps children be even more excited about learning to read.
 - Early reading experiences for children start with children learning to recognize photos and pictures. They learn that photos and pictures can be named and talked about. They also learn that stories can be told about pictures in books. And eventually they learn that the letters on the page tell the story about the pictures or describe them. For example, they start to understand that there is a connection between the picture of an apple and the letters “a-p-p-l-e” on a page—that the letters represent the idea of an apple.
- When children are becoming familiar with books, they are learning many things:
 - that books are important (because they are important to you!) and because they have so much interesting information in them;
 - how you use a book—hold it, turn the pages, talk about every page;



- how you can use it with someone or by yourself;
- where the story is (is it in the pictures or in the letters at the bottom of the page or in the memory of the person reading it?); and
- how books are organized (the title and authors' names are on the front and the story is inside).

Writing

How do children learn to write?

- By 5 years old, children may be writing some letters. They might be big and take up the whole page, they might be backward and upside down, but these are the beginning stages of actually writing words.
- Many children are interested in learning how to write their names and sometimes want to write the names of their friends as well. Children are most motivated to write about things that are important to them and may be more interested in having you write the word “triceratops” for them to copy than a simpler word.
- Children become interested in writing at different ages—some as early as 3, and others at 6. You don't have to “force” your child to write. If you keep opportunities open and pens, pencils and paper available, most children will initiate writing when they are ready.
- When children begin to write, they don't have to spell things correctly at first. Many children begin to put letters together based on their sounds as they begin to “write.” It is more important that children have the opportunity to practice using the letters than it is that they have all the words spelled correctly.

Tips for what families can do to support children learning language:

- You can support children's language development during your routine daily activities. Language isn't something that has to be taught in “special lessons.” When families talk with children they are naturally teaching language. Using language with children is all that families have to do. The more language families use with children, the more children will learn.



- In the car, at the store, on a walk, at home doing chores, while child is playing, during meals, or at bedtime. When you talk about things that are immediate and familiar, children can understand the language better because they have visual clues and experiences to match your words.

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- Talk about
 - what you are seeing,
 - what they are doing,
 - what you are doing,
 - what you did together earlier, or
 - what you are going to do later.
- Add a few new descriptive words when you are talking to children. One of the ways we naturally build vocabulary with children is by introducing new words along with the familiar ones they already know and with visual clues so they can more easily understand the new words.
 - “There is a dog.”
 - “There is a big, bouncy dog.”
 - “There is a big, bouncy, curly-haired dog who is sniffing the rock and wagging its tail.”
- Share stories with them.
 - Stories give you a chance to share what is important to you, what you value and how you think about things. Stories can help children feel connected to you and invested in learning language.
 - Children love to hear stories from your childhood. These stories can teach them about history, family and culture.
 - Stories can be about your day, or about things you are interested in. You can use stories to remember and reflect on your child’s day.



- Stories don't have to be long. They can include what happened, how you or your child felt about it, how people solved problems, or what it was like for you to be a child.
- You can use stories to demonstrate ideas that you value, for example, persistence, creativity, compassion, generosity, caring, bravery, teamwork.
- Ask children questions. Asking children questions gives them a chance to reflect on and think about what they know and also offers them an opportunity to practice choosing and articulating words. It also lets them know that you value their ideas.
- Ask them about
 - what they see,
 - what they are doing,
 - what they are thinking about,
 - how they feel,
 - what they like,
 - what happened earlier, or
 - what they think is going to happen.
- Ask them follow-up questions. When they tell you something, you can ask for more details.
 - Asking more questions challenges them to think more deeply about what they know and to find words to describe it. Responding to your questions is one way for them to stretch their language muscle.
 - “Wow, you and Rigo played dragons. What did the dragons do? Tell me more about the dragons. How do you think dragons make that fire that comes out of their mouths?”
 - “You drew a spaceship? What does your spaceship have inside? What makes your spaceship fly? Where is your spaceship going? Tell me more about your spaceship.”
- Ask questions that allow children to create their own answer (avoid questions that have yes or no answers). When we ask children questions that don't have a “right answer,” they can be more creative and thoughtful



in their answer, rather than just trying to figure out what you want them to say.

- Here are some examples of questions that might lead to less conversation or more conversation:
 - “What was the funnest thing you did today?” (open-ended—more conversation)
 - “Did you have fun at school today?” (yes/no or closed-ended question—less conversation)
 - “What can you tell me about your friend Theo?” (open-ended—more conversation)
 - “Do you like Theo?” (yes/no or closed-ended question—less conversation)
- Ask questions that you don’t have the answer for already. Asking questions that you don’t have the answer for already communicates to children that you are genuinely interested in their thinking and therefore that their thinking is important.
 - “What do you notice on this page?” (unknown answer—a good way to support children’s thinking)
 - “What do you think the dog is going to do?” (unknown answer—a good way to support children’s thinking)
 - “What color is the dog?” (known answer—less supportive of children’s thinking)
- You can invite your child to answer the question they asked you. Children usually have a guess already when they ask you a question. Asking children what they think encourages them to put their thoughts into words and gives them more opportunity to participate in conversation with you.
 - “That’s an interesting question. How do you think stars get up in the sky?”
- Listen to children. Children will talk more when they know that you are listening. More talking gives them more practice with language.

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- You can let them know you are listening by
 - making eye contact,
 - allowing quiet space for them to talk or finish what they are saying,
 - turning the TV off,
 - creating “talking time” regularly (for example, sitting on the couch together, taking a walk together, snuggling at bedtime),
 - repeating or restating what they said to let them know you heard them,
 - asking questions, or
 - thanking them for sharing their ideas or stories with you.
- You can use technology to support children’s language development
 - Use your phone to record children’s words and stories. When you play it back you can talk about what they said.
 - Use your phone to take photos of things you have seen and done during the day. When you look at the photos with your child you can talk about your observations and activities.

Tips for what families can do to support children in pre-reading activities:

- Look at photos and pictures with children, ask them what they see, and talk about what you see. *This helps children develop their observation skills and gives them the opportunity to practice and increase their vocabulary. Talking about pictures can help children experience the feeling of reading.*
- Ask them what they think is happening in the picture. *This gives children a chance to practice “telling their own story” and may help them to think of themselves as storytellers and writers.*
- Notice words in the environment and point them out to children. *When we point out the places that words are used in the world, children begin to see the importance of the written word and feel even more motivated to learn how to read those words.*
- When you are in the car, you can talk to children about the road signs.



- In the grocery store, children can help you “read” the labels on the cans and packages.
- Read them what you are writing. When children see writing in process and hear what it means, they can more clearly see the connection between writing letters and communicating a message.

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- “I’m making a list for the grocery store. Here it says ‘cheese,’ and here it says ‘rice.’ What kind of fruit should we put on our shopping list?”
- “I’m writing a note to your teacher that says we are going out of town next week.”
- Read notes and letters out loud to them.
 - “Here is a note your teacher wrote. It says, ‘Dear Families. . .’”
- Point to the words you are reading. *Pointing to words helps children understand how the spoken word is connected to the written word.*
 - “This is a note from Grandma. Here she says, “I love you.” Here she says, “I’m going to come to visit you.””
- Read them emails and text messages also. *Sometimes words on a screen aren’t as obvious to children. Showing them these words helps them see how technology can also carry written words and communication.*
 - Many of the words in their environment are electronic and this can also provide opportunities for learning to read.
- Look for opportunities to write down their words. Writing down children’s words is one of the most important things you can do to demonstrate to them the power of writing and reading. If their own words can be “saved” and shared with more people and at a different time, they can feel the power of writing and reading.
 - If they are feeling sad to say good-bye to their friend, you can suggest that they might want to write a note. They can draw the picture and tell



you what to write. Once you have written their words down, read them back to your child.

- If their friend is having a birthday, they can help make a card—by drawing and telling you the words to write.
- If they build something and want to save it, you can help them make a sign (using their words) to tape on their structure.
- Make drawing materials available to them (pencils, pens, markers, chalk). When they draw, you can ask if they want to tell you about it. You can write down their “story” on a post-it note and then ask if they want you to read it back to them. Drawing materials give them a chance to practice how to make lines and shapes—the skills they will eventually need for writing. Even drawing pictures gives them the sense of being able to communicate their ideas in different ways and they can begin to have the experience of being an “author” themselves.
- Read books to children. Reading books to children not only gives them practice with all the skills necessary for reading, but it also communicates to them how important reading is to you.

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- Provide a variety of children’s books on a shelf or in a basket that children can reach.
- You can make regular trips to the library or bookstore to get books for your child.
- Include reading as a regular activity with your child (find a time every day when you can read books with your child).
- Turn off the TV to make time for reading.
- Read books more than once to your child. Children generally love to read the same book many times.
- Talk about the book with your child.
- Before turning the page, ask your child what they think is going to happen next.



- As well as reading the words, you can discuss the story and pictures with your child: “What do you see on this page?”; “Why do you think the boy climbed to the top of that tree?”; “What would you do if you were riding that horse?”
- Before reading one of your child’s favorite books to him, ask if they want to tell you the story first.
- Sometimes, when reading to your child, you can point to the words as you read them.
- Explain to your child what the words on the cover of the book are. “This is the title of the book. It gives you an idea of what the book is about.” “This is the author’s name. The author is the person who wrote the book. This is the illustrator’s name. He is the person who made the pictures for the book.”
- Talk to your child about letters and sounds.
- Point out the letters in special words, like your child’s name. “Your name starts with an “S,” Sergio. Can you think of any other words that have that “ssss” sound? We can also look around for words that start with “S.” We could make a list of all the words we hear the “ssss” sound in.”
- Play with sounds and rhyming. Using songs, poems or other rhyming words, you can help children hear and compare the sounds of the words.
- You can play rhyming games in the car. “The bear has black hair. Can you think of a word that sounds like ‘bear’ and ‘hair’?”



Tips for what families can do to support children learning to write:

- Have a variety of writing tools and paper (pencils, pens, fine-tip markers, paper of different sizes) where children can see them and reach them themselves. Children often have the need to draw pictures or make signs in their play. Having materials readily available will encourage them to use these in their play more often.
- You can also include tape and paper strips, so children can make signs or envelopes and can write letters or notes. Some children may like to have paper with wide lines for writing.
- Create a favorite “word pouch” for your child that can hold words your child has asked you to write for them. When children can revisit those words, they start to become familiar with what they look like and can begin to start “reading” them.
- You can print or buy an alphabet chart so that you and your child can refer to it when she is wanting to know how something is spelled. Posting an alphabet allows your child to reference the letters on their own and may help them to feel like they can begin to write independently.
- You can offer sets of letters to your child. Having letters around helps your child become familiar with their shapes and allows her to start arranging them, even before he is fully able to write them.
 - There are different kinds of letters you can buy, including magnetic letters that children can use on the refrigerator, or you can simply write letters on little pieces of thick paper and offer them to children to use in making words.
- Invite your child to write with you when you are writing notes or making lists. Children love to be helpful and to participate in adult work. This can spark their interest in learning more about writing.
 - “I’m going to make a shopping list. Do you want to help me?” If you know your child can write certain letters, you can invite him to write them on your list. “I’m writing ‘apples’ on the list and that starts with an ‘A’ like your name. Do you want to write the ‘A’ for me?”



- Offer to write children's stories or words for them. Writing down their ideas and reading them back their words is a powerful experience for children in the effectiveness of writing to hold and express your ideas.

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- If there is a friend or someone they would like to communicate with, you can offer to help them write a note.
- If they draw a picture, you can ask them if they want to tell you about it and have you write down their ideas.

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