



8 months *to* 18 months

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT & LITERACY

How are children learning language?

Introduction

How does my child learn language?

- In the second year of life, children understand a lot of words and they are developing the ability to speak more and more of those words
- Often, when children are just learning to speak, only their family members can understand them. Their ability to pronounce words clearly is still developing and they are still learning the rules of communication, so they may have their own ways of saying certain words or phrases, for example, “googie” for “doggie,” “me frow it” for “I’m throwing it.”
- Families naturally support their children’s language development, by responding to them in conversation using the correct form (for example, when the child says “googie,” the parent responds, “That is a big doggie!”). Interestingly, it doesn’t help children learn language when adults tell them that their words are wrong or ask them to repeat it until they get it right. Children are naturally motivated to copy your language and will learn the correct form over time from regular conversations with you.
- At this age children often use one word to refer to several similar things. For instance, they might call cats, dogs, goats and sheep “kitties.” They recognize that they are all the same because they have fur and four legs, but they haven’t yet learned that the animals have different names.



- Conversations with an 18-month-old might sound like this:
 - Child: Doggie?
 - Parent: There was a doggie at the park yesterday.
 - Child: Go park mama?
 - Parent: We can go to the park later if you want. We need to get dressed first. Do you think the dog will still be there?
- Many of the things that you already do with your child help him or her learn to speak. Family members naturally talk about what is happening right now with children. This helps children to associate words with the things and experiences they are having.

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 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.



Receptive Language

What is my child understanding?

“Receptive language” refers to all the words that children hear and understand, even before they can speak the words themselves. Children understand more words than they can speak.

- Listening to what you say to them helps them learn words. When you say something and wait, they begin to understand how communication works.
- Children listen to words that are spoken directly to them as well as to conversations that are happening around them.
- They also pay attention to the tone of language and at this age begin to understand the meaning of tone as well as words. For instance, they can notice when your tone is excited, loving, frustrated, or scared and will eventually learn how to use tone in their own conversations.
- Young toddlers can understand simple requests, especially when the adult uses a gesture as well. For example, the adult holds out his hand and says “Give me your shoe, please.”
- Many of the things that you already do with your child help him or her learn to speak. Family members naturally talk about what is happening right now, what happened in the past and things that will happen soon with children. This helps children to associate words with the things and experiences they are having.

Expressive Language

Communication: Talking and reading

“Expressive language” includes all the sounds and words that a child makes.

- Young toddlers use beginning words, crying, sounds, and gestures to communicate their feelings, needs and ideas.
- Gestures include things like waving, pointing, reaching, and pushing.
- Young toddlers may mix sounds and words together when beginning to talk.



- When young toddlers start saying words, sometimes they just say a part of the word, like the beginning or the end of it, or they might make sounds that sound like the rhythm of the word.
- They often use one word to express a whole idea. For example, “up” means “pick me up”; “uh-oh” means something spilled or dropped or broke; “mama” may mean “Where is my mama?”
- Young toddlers repeat some of the words that we say to them, especially the last word that was said.
- Even when children don’t say it right when they first start talking, they keep practicing until their words sound like yours.
- Young toddlers are interested in books. They enjoy spending time with you looking at and reading a book. They watch you when you read, follow the pictures with their eyes, point to pictures, turn the pages and name some of the things in the book.

Here are some tips to support your child’s language development and interest in reading:

- Tell your child what you are going to do. Your child is more able to learn language when it is connected to something he is experiencing.

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- “I’m going get your coat so we can go outside.”
- “Here is your shirt. Do you want me to help you put it on?”
- “I’m going to make you a quesadilla for lunch.”
- When your child shows interest in something, offer words to describe what they are interested in. Your child is more interested in words that describe his interests.
 - “You just looked up at the sky. Did you hear that plane?”
 - “I see the rock you found. It is so smooth.”



- “You’ve been digging in the sand for a long time. That’s a big hole.” Talk about what your child is doing. This is like “show and tell.” At the same time your child is experiencing something, they are learning words to talk about it.
- “You ran down the grassy hill so fast!”
- “You filled up your dump truck with sand. Where will you take it?”
- “You carried your backpack all the way from the car to the apartment!”

- Talk about what you are doing. This is like “show and tell.” At the same time your child is seeing something, they are learning words to talk about it.
 - “I’m looking for my shoes.”
 - “I’m putting your food on the table. Can you push your chair over?”
 - “I’m checking to see if you need a diaper change.”
- Use many descriptive words. This is a way that your child builds vocabulary.
 - “I’ll help you look for your favorite shirt—the one with long sleeves, a hood and a pocket for both your hands in front.”
 - “Here are your pinto beans. I mashed them and refried them so they would be delicious for you.”
- Talk about the near future. This gives children a chance to make a mental picture about what is going to happen before it happens.
 - “Soon it will be time to brush your teeth, put on your jammies, read a story and go to bed.”
 - “Let’s get our shovel and watering can so we can go out and work in the garden.”
 - “After we finish getting dressed, we can read a book.”



- Talk about the recent past. This offers children a chance to develop a mental picture—a memory of what has happened.
 - “We were singing and clapping in the car today.”
 - “You and your friend drew chalk pictures on the sidewalk today.”
 - “We said good-bye to mama. She went to work.”
- Provide your child with books. If you have books available to your child, he learns that you value books and reading and he will also learn to value them.

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- Having books all around for your child will let her include them in different parts of her day.
- Using small board books with young children allows them to participate in turning the pages more easily, but they are also starting to enjoy longer stories in paperback books, as well.
- Read books to your child. This is your child’s first experience “reading” and the beginning step to her understanding that books hold stories, words, and information for her.
 - Read slowly so that your child will have a chance to listen to your words, examine the pictures and help turn the pages.
 - Often young children like to read the same books over and over.
 - This early experience with books can start a lifetime love of reading for our children.
- You can make simple books for your child using photos of people and things he enjoys. These homemade books help her see that books can represent things that she knows about.
 - You can glue photos on paper, write words for your story, and staple, tie or tape the pages together.
 - Stories don’t have to be long. They can just be a few pages. “James likes to ride his scooter. He rides over to the kitty and gives her a pat. When he is done riding on the scooter, he goes inside for lunch.”



- Talk about pictures and books with your child. Learning that pictures represent things is the first step to learning that letters can also represent things.
 - “I see stars in the sky. Do you see the stars?”
 - “I see lots of fish. What do you see?” (When your child points, you can name what they noticed.)
 - “Here is a photo of your *abuelita* and your *tia*.”

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