



Birth *to* 8 months

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT & LITERACY

How are children learning language?

Introduction

How does my child learn language?

- In the first year babies learn so much about language and communication, even though they may only speak a few words on their first birthday. They are born interested and motivated to learn language and listen to all the words and other sounds in their environment, especially from the people they love.
- They learn language naturally from you and the other people around them through the ways we talk to them from the minute they are born and in every interaction.
- Even young babies and their family members have “conversations,” where the baby coos or babbles and waits and the adult talks back to the child. Starting with these conversations, infants begin to learn how conversations go, enjoy the experience of being “listened to,” and eagerly take in the words their families are saying to them.
- Many families find that using some simple baby signs and gestures (i.e., “more,” “water,” “milk,” “all done”) offer their children a chance to communicate before they can say words.
- 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.



Expressive Language

Communication: Talking and reading

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

- Infants use crying, sounds, and gestures to communicate their feelings, needs and ideas.
- Gestures include things like waving for “bye-bye,” both arms up for “pick me up,” and shaking head from side to side to resist eating a certain food.
- Children practice many different sounds for a long time before they actually make words. They often string sounds together, like “ba-ba-ba” or “da-da-da,” and enjoy when people repeat those sounds back to them.
- At first they just practice different sounds, enjoying how the sounds feel in their mouth, but in a few months, their sounds will start to have meaning. For example, “m-m-m-m-m” will be used more when asking for mama.
- When they 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.
- Even when children don’t say it right when they first start talking, they keep practicing until their words sound like yours.
- Infants take turns in conversation with family members. When the other person stops talking, the infant will babble back.
- Babies are interested in books. They enjoy spending time with you looking at and reading a book. They watch you when you read and follow the pictures with their eyes.
- Babies pick books up as soon as they can and try to open them, chew on them or turn the pages. They soon begin to smile and point and show preference for certain books.



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 related to something she is experiencing.

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- "I'm going to pick you up."
- "Here is your shirt. Let's put it over your head."
- "Here is a bite of carrots for you to eat."
- 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 their interests.
 - "Did you just hear the dog bark?"
 - "You are touching the cat. He is so soft and furry."
 - "You are waving to daddy. Are you saying 'bye-bye'?"
 - "You are reaching for my water. Are you thirsty?"
- 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 just crawled all the way to the door!"
 - "When you touched that ball, it rolled away."
 - "You picked up that bean and put it in your mouth."
- 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 getting your peas and bib ready so you can eat."
 - "I'm checking to see if you need a diaper change."



- Use many descriptive words. This is a way that your child builds vocabulary.
 - “Your favorite blanket is green and blue and fuzzy all over.”
 - “Here are your pinto beans. I mashed them so they would be soft 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 for your bottle.”
 - “I’m getting the water ready so you can have a bath.”
 - “After we finish changing your diaper, 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 ate so many pears for lunch today.”
 - “We said good-bye to mama. She went to work.”
- Provide your baby with books. If you offer books to your baby, he learns that you value books and he will also learn to appreciate them.

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- Having books within your baby’s reach lets them choose to look at them whenever they are interested.
- Using small board books with young babies allows them to participate in turning the pages more easily.
- Read books to your baby. This is your baby’s first experience “reading” and the beginning step to him understanding that books hold stories, words, and information for him.
 - Even before your baby can sit up, you can lie down next to him and hold the book up so you can both see it.
 - Read slowly so that your baby will have a chance to listen to your words and examine the pictures.



- This early experience with books can start a lifetime love of reading for our children.
- You can make simple books for your baby using photos of people and things she loves. These 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. "Julia likes to eat. She eats with her fingers and with the spoon. She likes to eat rice, bananas and chicken."
- 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."

<http://allaboutyoungchildren.org>