

Reinforcing Language Skills for Our Youngest Learners

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By Claudina Hannon

Language development is a remarkable process for parents to witness. From the time our children are infants, we want to capture those precious moments with our cameras. The babbles turn into repetitive syllables, which then turn into words and eventually sentences. It's mesmerizing to hear our children's first "mama" or "dada" and to watch them progress from those simple words to full conversations.

There are many things to keep in mind when thinking about little ones' language development:

- What they might be picking up from adults, children, and others they interact with
- How fast they acquire language
- What we can do to help them through this fascinating process

It's natural to wonder if your child's language is developing appropriately. Many parents ask themselves common questions, such as:

- Is my child saying the number of words that doctors recommend at his age?
- Is my child speaking as much as the neighbor's child who is the same age?

Toddlers (18 to 36 months). Your little one will become extra vocal during this stage. Name and describe objects, actions, people, and feelings. Read books that introduce him to new vocabulary, and sing songs with plenty of repetitive words. You can clap along to the rhythm to help your child recognize all the sounds in the words. Always remember to have conversations with him throughout the day or when you're together, so he can learn by hearing you speak and hearing how you use language. When he says a word or two ("Ball!"), expand on it to give him more language: "Oh! Your ball rolled under the chair!" Use affirmative statements (saying what the child can or should do) more than prohibitive statements (saying what the child should not do). For example, tell your toddler "Let's use our walking feet" instead of "Don't run inside." This approach will help the child think about the right way to do something, which can be a positive reinforcement to follow your lead in a situation.

Preschoolers (3 to 5 year olds). As your child's language skills become more complex, you'll have lots of opportunities to engage in extended conversations with each other. Encourage her to talk during discussions, listen to her attentively as she speaks, and ask her open-ended questions relevant to what she is saying. This helps her say aloud what she's thinking in more complex ways. Urge your child to talk about things that have already happened or that will happen in the future: "Do you remember what we saw the last time we went for a walk? . . . Yes, we saw a blue jay, didn't we? What do you think we might see this time?"

Keep in mind that because language is a learning process, your child will make mistakes as she speaks. When children use incorrect grammar during this stage, rather than correct them, help them by responding with correct grammar as you have a conversation. If your child says, "I color orange frog," you can respond with "Yes, I see you have colored the frog orange." Another fun activity is asking her to share her thoughts during dramatic play, as she imagines herself in different scenarios. Feel free to use your creativity to make up stories or build onto hers—it will lead her to do the same. Make the most of reading time since it allows you to not only talk about the plot and the characters, but also to ask questions about what she sees and thinks is taking place in the story. Introduce your preschooler to complex words and what they mean. Make story time fun and meaningful. Saying "I wonder what the monkey will do next!" is more engaging for a young child than asking her, "Where do monkeys live?"

Language acquisition can be a wonderful process for all parents to witness. Especially when we acknowledge that we can take part in helping children learn and acquire the language skills they will need to communicate clearly.

Claudina Hannon, MA, is the staff writer/editor at the Council for Professional Recognition. She is also a linguist and journalist whose experience includes bilingual early childhood education, language acquisition, and teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL). Communications is our Child Development Associate's®

(CDA) functional area #6. The Communications chapter in the Essentials for Working with Young Children textbook explores ways to foster language skills in infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and dual language learners.

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