

Developing your child's early communication skills - advice for parents

Follow the child's lead:

Talking to children about objects and events that have caught their attention is especially important for the development of language. It can help to look out for moments when your child expresses an interest in something, and then talk about it with them using both words and gestures. This is called **contingent talk**. Responding to children in this way reinforces their motivation to communicate and helps them associate the words you say with the things you are talking about.

Face-to-face interaction

Babies are interested in their caregivers' faces and enjoy making eye contact. During the activity of observing face-to-face emotional responses, the infant may initiate sounds like "aaaa" or "ga-ga-ga", adding facial and gestural expressions. You can engage your baby this way when they are in your arms or playing on the floor, for example. These everyday interactions allow us to share affection, and discover what your baby is interested in. For example, you might notice where they are looking, or perhaps how they react to an unexpected sound. By tuning in this way and by responding to each other, you are laying the foundation for language learning.

Nursery rhymes and music

Singing songs is a fun way to introduce infants to the rhythmic patterns that make up language. Children don't care if we are professional singers or tone deaf! They enjoy listening and watching as you move to the beat of the song, or just sing with affection. You can also use more active songs, with emphasis on the important words and adding gestures and movements that accompany the words. Your baby may be able to complete a line or two if you stop singing before an important word and let them have a go. Singing can be a lovely way to build bonds and promote language at the same time.

Imitation

Responding to your baby's vocalizations by repeating them back to them can be very rewarding, especially in face-to-face interactions. Imitation can help the baby realize how sounds can have a communicative effect. You can imitate different aspects of their babble: for example, vowels or consonants and intonation patterns. You can also mimic facial expressions and gestures. Imitation facilitates the learning of early communicative exchanges and language.

Motherese

When we talk to babies we tend to exaggerate our intonation, speak slower than we do with adults, use fewer words, make longer pauses and use animated facial expressions and gestures. This is called “motherese”. It can help to highlight keywords and make it easier for babies to break into language. We also tend to repeat information on the same topic in different ways. For example, imagine that you are playing with a child with a toy car that has caught their attention. You can talk about the car using different expressions: “Oh! A car! Look at this car. How nice. Is it driving off? Oh the car has gone! Bye bye car!” You can also talk about the features of the car, for example, the noise it makes “Brum Brum ...”, “toot ... toot...” what colour it is “the green, car”, or what parts it has “open the car door...”. We know that this kind of child-directed speech, pitched at the child’s level, facilitates learning.

Interpreting child talk

Children enjoy playing at making different sounds, but at first they don’t always make a lot of sense. Treating what they say as if it were meaningful is a great strategy that should promote early communication. Children often use intonation to convey that they are asking a question or expressing interest even if they don’t have the words to do so. Adults can interpret these early utterances according to their rise and fall intonation and respond appropriately. This can enable infants to notice that what they say can have an impact and can be used to spark off interaction.

Expose your child to different communicative contexts, people and activities

Talking in different settings and with different people provides a rich range of opportunities to use new words in new ways and can thereby strengthen language understanding. It is also important that children have the opportunity to hear the peculiarities of different people’s speech, allowing them to compare and extract the common features of the language of the community. Reading books is another great way to introduce children to a wider pool of words.

Interacting through book reading

Book reading is a great way to help children’s communicative development. You could talk about the pictures, do the voices of the characters, add in songs, take turns in turning the page, or have fun finding characters you like. It’s fine to go at your child’s pace and you don’t need to read every word on the page. Instead, by talking about what has captured their interest, you keep them actively involved in communicating.

Talking to your baby

Children come into the world ready to learn language. Through interaction with others, they are able to learn about the sounds, words, and grammatical patterns in the language of their environment. We just have to make sure that they hear the language around them. Hearing it in interaction is all the better. So talking to them about what has caught their attention can be a great way to enhance their language skills.

Harness the value of routines

Much of babies' everyday lives are routines –we do the same things several times a day, every day. The sheer repetitiveness of these activities makes them great opportunities for learning– babies can predict what is going to happen next! Common routines include getting up in the morning, or taking a bath at bedtime. Each family will have their own habits that babies get used to. When you have a familiar routine, if you stop at a given point in it, you might notice that your baby responds, expecting you to carry on in the way you normally do. For example, when you sing a song you can stop before a key word and look for their reaction. The familiarity of routines can give a valuable boost to language learning. For example, at meal time, you might talk about the things you always drink or eat (e.g., “Here’s your water! Mmmm fresh water!”) and these words, used in a routine context, would be particularly easy to pick up.

Create opportunities for communication

There are all sorts of way in which you can create opportunities to talk with your child about something that has happened or something that interests you both. For example, when someone comes to the door, you can talk about who it might be, suggesting you go and see, talk about who it is and so on. Or at meal times you might give a choice of foods, naming two options and seeing which they choose -allowing them to see the effect of communicating to you what they want. In any situation, you can use your voice, gestures and direction of gaze to help children figure out what you are talking about.

Respond to your baby's gestures

Babies often point to things to draw your attention to them. When you follow their gestures, you naturally end up in joint attention, where both parties are mutually aware that they are attending to the same thing. This is rewarding in itself for babies but it can also help language development if you translate their gestures into words. Babies point with different intentions, so sometimes they might want to ask for an object, other times they might want you to tell them about it. Responding to babies' points encourages them to communicate with you.

Observe how your child reacts to things

Taking the time to watch how your child is taking things in can be fascinating and allows you to tune into their emotions and interests. Good times for this might be after a meal, when they are relaxed and contented. These calmer moments are rich with the opportunity for quiet conversation with a gentle tone of voice. Bath time is another occasion for observing how they respond to the different sensations of undressing, getting into the water, splashing around and getting dry again. You can talk about all of this with them and match this talk with facial expressions and sounds that convey emotions.

Repeat and check

If your baby makes speech sounds that appear to be intended as words but are not clear, there are a few things you can do. You could imitate the sounds and wait to see if they say them again with other clues to their intent. If you are not sure which of a few words they mean, you could give

them a few options, for example, “There’s a cat and car. Which one do you want, the cat?”. If you can figure out what they meant to say, we can repeat the words and even expand on them a little. “The car, right? Here it is! The car! Shall we play with the car for a while?”. Even if you can’t understand exactly what they meant, it can still help to respond as best you can. It’s fine to maintain a conversation without understanding everything. Making communication relaxed and rewarding can help to encourage further talk.

Talk about the here and now, the past and the immediate future

Once children can communicate about the world around them in the here and now, they are in a position to begin discussing events removed in space and time. You might talk in anticipation about a specific event, like saying go to the park before heading out the door. We can also talk about what happened before, for example, when you saw a person or did something that’s important to your child, such as seeing grandparents. Talking about things that are not in the here and now, once children are ready, allows the development of more advanced language abilities.

The source of this document can be accessed [here](#)

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