

Language 2

Helping your child develop language

You & Your Child

The way children learn language is so complex that even specialists have a difficult time completely explaining how it happens.

Children learn a lot about language on their own and at their own pace. The complex learning process occurs almost unconsciously.

When you talk to your baby, even for the first time, you are introducing him or her to your voice and to the sounds that are common in the language you speak.

As a parent, there are several things you can do to support your child's language development. The most basic rules are to encourage your child to talk and listen, to respond to your child's sounds, words, and questions, and to always be patient when he or she is trying to talk.

On Back

What you can do to support your child's language development.

A publication of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development made possible with help from the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund For Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.

For more Parenting Guides and other information, visit the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development on the Internet at www.pitt.edu/~ocdweb/familyissues/guides

You & Your Child may be reproduced for non-profit use only.



Helping your child develop language

Interact with your child

The most important thing you can do to encourage language development is to respond to your child, something that comes naturally to most parents.

Respond to the sounds your child makes – whatever they are. Imitate the sounds, even if they are not real words. Make a surprise face, or laugh – anything that will help your child realize the sounds he or she makes will get a response from you.

Talk to your child often

Children learn language by listening to those who are closest to them. You should:

- Talk to your child from the day he or she is born.
- Talk directly to your baby. Allow your baby to see your face and your expression. If you have a large family, make sure you don't ignore your baby. He or she needs one-on-one talk.
- Use exaggerated expressions and gestures when you talk to your baby.

Name things that your child sees and does

Pointing out objects and telling your baby or young child what they are called helps them learn words.

- Name objects in your house and outside. Describe what they are. For example, "Here is your coat."
- Label actions. When you take your child's hand, say, "I'm going to hold your hand." If you pick up your child, say, "Up we go."
- If your child points to an object and says, "That?" label the object with a word. For example, if your child points to a cup and says, "That?" you say, "cup."

Don't worry about "made-up" words

Children sometimes make up words. This is nothing to worry about and you shouldn't correct your child. Just show your child that you understand what he or she is saying. The correct words will come.

Songs and rhymes help

Children love songs, rhymes, and stories. Listening to them helps children learn language.

Sing songs, tell nursery rhymes, and read story books to your child from infancy on. When children are older, answer questions and talk about the nursery rhymes and stories you read.

Expand what your child says

Young talkers often use few words to communicate. Add to your child's language by expanding upon what he or she says. But don't criticize or scold.

For example, if you ask which jacket your child wants to wear and he or she responds by pointing and saying, "this," simply say, "Oh, you want to wear the green jacket."

Have conversations

You can help expand a preschool-age child's use of language by having discussions with him or her about what they are doing or feeling.

Be patient if your child stumbles a bit. Gently help your child with the meanings of words that he or she doesn't seem to have a clear understanding of.

Encourage, don't discourage

Be careful not to discourage your child from using language.

- Don't finish your child's sentences when he or she is having trouble or is speaking slowly.
- Don't correct a toddler's pronunciation. Just say the word clearly and correctly yourself.
- Don't correct your young child's grammatical errors. He or she will learn the correct grammar later.
- Don't ignore your child if you cannot understand what he or she is saying. Be patient and encourage him or her to keep trying to communicate.

