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NF05-643 Infants Develop Language Naturally

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Infants Develop Language Naturally

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First in a series of nine fact sheets developed through a national research project — StoryQUEST — through the California Institute on Human Services, Sonoma State University.

StoryQUEST's Vision

High-quality early relationships and experiences throughout their daily routines provide each infant and toddler with the tools and skills to build a strong foundation for future school readiness. Families, caregivers and communities as a whole collaborate to enable all children to become highly competent in language and literacy.

Did you know?

- Infants are mastering language simply by listening to us talk.
- Babies begin learning about language in the first months of life. They can hear the difference between all the consonants and vowels used in any language.
- By the age of 6 months, infants have trained their ears to the sounds of their native language, and they have learned to distinguish these sounds before actually learning words.

Baby talk, or “Parentese,” makes it easier for the baby to learn a language because the sounds are greatly exaggerated.

Communicating With Children

When talking with a child:

- Use short, simple sentences.
- Reduce the rate of speaking.
- Repeat words, phrases and sentences.
- Repeat what you say to your child.
- Repeat what your child says to you.
- Pause between words.
- Talk about the here and now.
- Use a lot of questions and requests.

- Use a slightly higher pitch and an exaggerated intonation pattern.
- Talk about objects that your child is focused on or actions he/she is engaged in.

Language and Communication Development

Oral language is key to later literacy development. Infants focus on and develop language mostly because they want to communicate.

Infants

- Babies want to look, touch, taste and listen to everything that they encounter (reaching, grasping, mouthing).

Toddlers

- Discover that stories have a beginning, middle and end.
- Learn to love stories and rhymes.
- Enjoy books with familiar characters, objects and events.
- Find predictable routines and rituals very comforting.
- Love to practice new skills and knowledge.
- Learn about feelings and like to hear stories about emotions.
- Learn the difference between real and pretend.
- Enjoy stories about make-believe (e.g., animals who dress up and talk like people).

Young Children

- Show an interest in pictures by looking, patting, pointing or cooing at them.
- Look at and recognize pictures in a book.
- Learn about books and stories by actively listening and interacting with books.
- Understand the picture represents a real object.

Caregivers

- Exaggerate voice and actions to keep toddlers interested.
- Involve toddlers by encouraging them to join in familiar phrases or words.
- Act out an action in the story.
- Find things hidden in a picture.

Engaging in Conversation

Frequent one-to-one early conversations, maintaining eye contact, and repeating back those gurgles and coos from the baby help the infant to understand the nature of language and conversation. Vocalization in early months sets the stage for early language and literacy skills.

When adults engage babies in playful conversation by responding back to the baby when he makes a coo or sound, the adult is helping to lay the foundation for turn taking in later conversations and is providing the beginning stages of listening and responding for later literacy development.

Making up stories about daily events, singing songs about the people and places a baby knows and describing what is happening during daily routines give a basis for early language and literacy development.

Telling the same stories and singing the same songs over and over may feel boring to you, but in a small child learning happens with repetition. Speaking in warm, expressive voices and providing opportunities for a baby to hear different sounds, pitch and tonal characteristics of language are important. The more language they hear, the more those parts of the brain will grow and develop.

Tips for Effective Communication With Your Baby

- Keep up a running narration of your activities. It doesn't matter that your baby doesn't understand a word you're saying. "I am getting cereal because I can see that you're hungry." "It's cold outside, so we should bundle up!"
- Ask lots of questions, such as "why," "how" and "what do you think will happen?" Wait for a response, even though it will be a long time before you get an answer.
- Let your baby participate. You'll be surprised to see that, given a chance, even a baby a few months old will continue a coo or giggle to the conversation. "You're smiling. I see that you're happy today." When she vocalizes or makes a gesture, respond as though she's said something: "Oh, you like that color? It is a nice shade of purple."
- Pay attention. Find out what your baby likes and dislikes and what his moods are. Even babies want to be left alone sometimes. If he turns away, closes his eyes or becomes fussy, ease up.

- Act out and exaggerate animal sounds. "Moooo cow!" Your enthusiasm encourages the baby to make sounds too.
- Use dramatic tones, surprise tones, whispers, drawn-out vowels and special effects to keep a baby engaged. "She was soooooo sleepy!"
- Read to your baby. Infants of all ages enjoy being read to. Get into the habit in the first months and you'll find this is a rewarding experience for both of you through many years.
- Make time for songs, rhymes and other "poetry." No matter how silly the poem, memorizing helps build good reading skills.

Communication and Language in Play

Play involves language with adults that provides a foundation for later literacy. Play activities can support the development of emergent literacy skills.

Children at play

- Explore their environment, act out their thinking and assume the roles and perspectives of others.
- Create their own "meanings" (e.g., a chair can become a car, a wooden spoon can become a paintbrush).
- Focus on the act of playing itself rather than goals. Play is self-sustaining because it is satisfying.
- Learn and practice new behaviors.

Families and caregivers

- Value play as a constructive way for children to occupy themselves and a way for children to make friends.
- Use play to gain cooperation in caregiving routines, to manage behavior, to help children recover from distress and to teach desirable behaviors.
- Give children time and space to play.

Educators

- Find play is a rich opportunity for teaching cognitive, social, motor and adaptive skills.

StoryQUEST Team

The members of the 2003-2004 StoryQUEST-CNCS team were:

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