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Infants Develop Language Naturally. G1984

Janet S. Hanna

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Kayla M. Hinrichs

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, khinrichs3@unl.edu

Carla J. Mahar

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, cmahar1@unl.edu

John Defrain

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, jdefrain1@unl.edu

Tonia Renee Durden

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, tdurden2@unl.edu

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Infants Develop Language Naturally

Adapted by Janet S. Hanna, Kayla M. Hinrichs and Carla J. Mahar, Extension Educators
and John D. DeFrain and Tonia R. Durden, Family Life Specialists

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. This series was developed as part of a national research project — StoryQUEST — through the California Institute on Human Services, Sonoma State University.

First in a series of nine, this NebGuide discusses the importance of speaking to and engaging infants in communication.

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 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

- Want to look, touch, taste, and listen to everything 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).
- Engage in private speech (talking aloud to themselves: “Baby sick”).

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 help the infant 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 when the baby makes a coo or sound, the adult is helping 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 for 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: “I am getting cereal because I can see that you’re hungry.” “It’s cold outside, so we should bundle up!” It doesn’t matter that your baby doesn’t seem to understand or acknowledge what you’re saying.
- Ask a lot of questions, such as “why,” “how,” and “what do you think will happen?” Wait for a response, verbal or nonverbal, 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 contribute a coo or giggle to the conversation. “You’re smiling. I see that you’re happy today.” When your baby vocalizes or makes a gesture, respond as though he/she has 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/her moods are. Even babies want to be left alone sometimes. If your baby turns away, closes 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.

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