

Baby Talk

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My six-month old recently has reminded me of the amazing process of speech and language development. Even though I'm the mother of two older children and a speech-language pathologist who has studied this area, it's still amazing to watch my little one discover how her tongue can make a variety of sounds (her favorite being the slobbery raspberries).

So much learning goes on in the first year of a baby's life! A newborn, who can only cry to communicate, becomes a toddler who is often very effective at expressing himself using facial expressions, gestures, and maybe even a few words. A tiny baby who doesn't understand any language grows into a one-year old who can follow simple directions. Throughout this journey, there are many ways that parents can stimulate speech and language development.

Talking to Your Baby Stimulates Language

The most important thing that you can do to help your baby learn to use and understand words is to talk to him! I've had several parents tell me that they didn't talk with their young children because the children couldn't talk back. However, babies learn language by listening to people talk.

The easiest way to talk to your baby is to give a running commentary on what you do throughout the day. As you make breakfast, talk about preparing the food, eating it, and cleaning up afterwards (e.g. "Here's your cereal. Let's put it in a bowl. Mmmm, you love cereal. Want more? Cereal is all gone. The bowl goes in the sink. Ready to play?").

When your baby shows special interest in an item, use very simple language to teach basic vocabulary. If he loves to roll a ball back and forth, talk about it as you play (e.g. "Ball. Mommy has ball. Here comes ball! Ball. Roll ball. Yay!"). If you're not used to talking much with your little one, it may seem strange at first. Just keep describing what's happening and use simple language when you really have your baby's attention. As your baby gets older, you may notice that he makes sounds to get your attention and to "talk" to you!

Singing Develops Listening and Speaking

Singing with your baby is another great way to encourage listening and speaking. Even newborns can enjoy soothing lullabies and softly sung favorites such as "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star." Hearing repetitive verses will eventually lead the older baby to predict the words that are coming next. One day, your little one may surprise you by finishing the end of a verse!

Older babies love songs and rhymes that involve movement, such as "If You're Happy and You Know It Clap Your Hands." When you get tired of singing the same songs over and over, make up songs about your baby's activities. In my house, we sing about washing hands, taking a bath, making dinner, getting diapers changed, and so on. My older kids still enjoy singing and they often make up songs for the baby.

Games Help in Understanding Words

Games also help babies get ready to use and understand words. Peek-a-boo is an all-time favorite. Hide behind something and then suddenly re-appear, which often causes your baby to squeal or giggle with delight. You can also hide favorite toys under a towel or blanket and help your baby find them. These activities teach your baby that even when she can't see something, it is still there. This eventually allows a child to talk about something or ask for something that she can't see.

Another game that many babies enjoy is "Where's baby's nose?" Of course, this can involve any body part, but the idea is to make it fun to find your little one's nose, belly, hands, etc. You can take your baby's hand and help her touch different parts on herself and on you while naming them. Some babies love to look at themselves and other people in the mirror, so this offers another opportunity to teach body parts. Soon she may be able to show you her nose all by herself!

Signs and Gestures Encourage Communication

Teaching gestures and a few simple signs encourages your baby to communicate with you at an early age. Show your baby how to make a gesture and also say the word that goes with it. While waving good-bye to Daddy, take baby's hand to help him wave and say, "Bye-bye Daddy." When you show your baby the dog across the street, point and say, "Look, a doggie!"

Many parents have told me that they are afraid their babies won't talk if they learn how to sign. However, studies have shown that using sign language actually helps babies learn to talk because they realize that communication is such a powerful tool. I taught my children the signs for *eat, drink, more, milk, sleep, please, thank-you*, and a few of their favorite toys (*ball, car, etc*).

When a baby knows a few signs for important things in his life, it helps him to express what he wants and decreases his frustration. There are good resources at the local libraries and book stores if you are interested in learning some baby signs.

If you ever have concerns about your baby's language development or if your baby has been diagnosed with a condition that can affect speech and language skills, talk with your pediatrician or a speech-language pathologist.

There are many additional activities and services available that can help your little one with learning to communicate.

About the author: Cara Boledovic, M.S., CCC-SLP, is a Pediatric Speech-Language Pathologist with Amber Hill Physical Therapy, where speech therapy services are offered through Frederick Pediatric Therapy, LLC at the Frederick Pediatric Clinic. Ms. Boledovic has a Certificate of Clinical Competence from the American Speech-Language Hearing Association and a license in Speech-Language Pathology from the MD State Board of Audiologists, HADs and Speech-Language pathologists. For more information on Amber Hill's Pediatric Program, call 301-663-8322.