

Why you must talk to infants and toddlers

The earliest years are a sensitive time for the development of language learning. Infants are motivated to communicate from birth; learning about communication by looking and listening to their caregivers. They watch faces and communicate by making noises and copying what others do. For example, watch what an infant does when you stick out your tongue at them! Infants will begin to imitate their caregivers and to engage in turn-taking which mimics natural conversation. In time, infants and toddlers begin to understand what is being said to them and learn how to say words and sentences clearly themselves.

While language learning will continue throughout life, infant experiences are the foundation. Therefore, it is very important that infants' and toddlers' experiences in this period provide them with sufficient language exposure to nourish their brain. Experiences of language-rich interaction has been described as "language nutrition" for infants and toddlers.

Language is incredibly important in enabling both social and cognitive development. Developing language concepts helps build infants' and toddlers' brains and gives them the means to think and develop ideas and express themselves. It provides a way to communicate, as well as to conceptualise and access knowledge, and is a tool for thinking, planning and problem-solving. It enables children to understand social situations and emotions as well as negotiate social difficulties. Without sufficient oral language development, children find it difficult to achieve important interpersonal and academic goals. In addition, children with impaired language development are more at risk of mental health issues and antisocial behaviour in adolescence. Therefore the development of infants' and toddlers' language skills has many, far-reaching implications for their later learning.

What language experiences 'feed' infants' and toddlers' language development?

Both the quantity and quality of language that children experience in the first three years of life has important implications for their language development. Research shows that infants and toddlers who are spoken to more often have larger vocabularies and better speech development at age three than children who are spoken to less often. They have better cognitive development, social skills, literacy achievement and academic skills and are better prepared for starting and succeeding at school. Research also shows that communication skill is clearly related to literacy development. Language and speech development at age three was also found to predict performance on vocabulary, language development and reading comprehension at age nine and ten years. Children with larger vocabularies find it easier to learn and comprehend new words later on.

Multiple studies have shown that the quantity of language spoken to the child predicts their later vocabulary. Infants and toddlers develop not only the vocabulary that they have heard from their parents and caregivers, but also sentence length, speech patterns and even the duration of their conversations are similar to that of their caregivers. Therefore, children with more exposure to a greater variety of language are at an advantage in language learning.

However, quality is also important. Quality language interactions involve responsiveness to the infant or toddler. One feature of quality interactions is "serve and return" like a tennis match. Here the infant's or toddler's attempt to communicate is recognised as communication by an adult, and the adult responds, developing an exchange with the child. This interaction pattern is important for building and strengthening networks in the brain. It affirms the infant or toddler's experiences and enables new abilities to be nurtured and strengthened.

Research shows that meaningful exchanges of communication (when a caregiver's response to an infant is contingent to, appropriate and co-ordinated with the infant's or toddler's communication) are most beneficial for language development. This means that being exposed to television or adult conversations in which they do not take part do not help children's language development. Finally, quality communication combines several modalities, for example, pointing to or touching objects while talking about them. This makes acquiring vocabulary easier for infants and toddlers.

Stimulating language development is really very simple – regularly talking, singing and reading books to infants and toddlers helps them to learn to listen, and gives them an opportunity to respond and be listened to. Engaging with infants and toddlers and talking about what they are looking at and interested in, encourages and supports their innate drive to communicate.

How does communication develop?

A six-month-old infant has lots of communicative skills. She or he will be able to make sounds, both to her or himself, and to gain the attention of others, and to respond when someone is talking to her or him. S/he will watch your face when you talk to her/him, and get excited, perhaps vocalising or kicking her/his feet or waving her/his arms, when s/he hears voices. S/he will smile and laugh when other people smile and laugh.

A one-year-old infant will be able to make talking noises, stringing sounds together, and s/he will take conversational turns, babbling for her or his turn in conversation. S/he can point or look at you to get your attention. S/he might be saying her/his first words and perhaps use gestures to communicate. S/he will certainly understand simple words, especially when accompanied by gestures and will know that names of familiar objects and people.

An 18-month-old toddler can say about 20 words, although s/he might use them in a baby way, so that only familiar adults understand them. S/he will point to things when you ask her/him to, and understand a lot of familiar words and short phrases.

A two-year old toddler will understand between 200 and 500 words, and use around 50 her or himself. S/he will start to put short sentences of two or three words together, and ask simple questions such as “what’s that?” S/he will enjoy pretend play and talk to her or himself as s/he plays.

Some children can have specific developmental difficulties. These can be related to making speech sounds correctly, fluency (hesitations and stammering), understanding language, or speaking and using language socially. Often such difficulties are due to delayed development, but some can be related to long-term speech, language or communication needs which require additional support and strategies.

How to support language development in the early years

- Talk! Every moment is a potential talking moment. Tell infants and toddlers what you are doing, what you see, what you notice about them or what they are doing, where you are going. “Yes, I see the water too! What a big splash!” or “I love that blue truck you are playing with. It is driving up and down”.
- Talk through routines such as mealtimes and nappy changing. Describe sensations and textures; for example, “This yoghurt is smooth” and “This banana is sweet”.
- Sing songs and rhymes, especially those with actions or lots of repetition. Rhythm and repetitive language make language learning easier for infants and toddlers.
- Read books everyday, sharing them together and talk about the pictures and characters. Relate books to everyday experience (for example, by seeing a firetruck on the road and linking it back to a story or song, or, if there is a dog in a book, relate it to the dog you know they have at home). Books are an important source of new knowledge and vocabulary and a language that is unlike everyday conversation. Sit an infant or toddler on your lap and cuddle as you read, as reading together also helps build strong bonds. It is never too early to begin reading and babies benefit from sharing books from birth.

Specific strategies for supporting infants’ language development

- Look into infants’ eyes, hold their hands and speak to them in a gentle voice.
- Use actions when you can, for example, waving when you say “bye bye” and saying “up” as you hold your hands out to an infant to lift them.
- Be face-to-face and give infants and toddlers a chance to respond to your talk, with a sound or an action. Show infants and toddlers that you are listening, so that they know you are interested in what they have to communicate. This encourages him or her to communicate more.
- Copy an infant’s babbling, taking turns with them and developing a conversation. Some of the earliest ways to encourage language development are look into an infant’s face when talking to them, and repeating the noises that they make. Encourage

toddlers to talk and take turns in conversation. These back and forth conversations in which children have to actively participate, really develop their brains. With young infants, it is important to also use touch and gestures as communication. Simply hold their hands and wait for them to smile – when they do, smile back. When they coo, coo back.

- Play peek-a-boo, asking “Where’s [infant’s name]?” and then exclaiming “There you are!”
- Use real language rather than ‘baby talk’. But talk more slowly, emphasising key words and use shorter phrases, more repetition, gestures and facial expression, and a higher pitch. These are the features of ‘motherese’ or ‘parentese’, which research shows captures infants’ attention more easily, and is more easily processed, than the kind of speech we usually direct to adults. Also, infants seem to understand that ‘parentese’ speech is directed towards them, and are more likely to respond to and imitate an adult using parentese. Research indicates that infants being addressed in parentese spend longer looking at the adult, with greater focus, which enables more effective interactions. Parentese also appears to help infants separate out and recognise individual words, and seems to improve children’s word learning. Infants spoken to with parentese have larger vocabularies later on.
- Learn to interpret an infant or toddler’s signals so you can respond appropriately. This makes an infant or toddler feel understood and important.
- Notice what infants look at or touch, as in this way they are communicating their interests. Engage in shared attention with infants on these objects, accompanying your shared gaze or movements with talk. When infants and toddlers point to objects, tell them what these are, to encourage these early communicative skills. Responding to pointing and gesturing will encourage infants and toddlers to engage in more of it. Research finds that infants who engage in more pointing and gesturing will later understand more words.
- Try to be mostly responsive to infants and toddlers, even if not consistently so. There are likely to be times when your response is delayed or absent while you attend to other tasks. But when these lapses occur within relationships that are mostly nurturing and responsive, they encourage children to develop resilience.
- Specific strategies for supporting toddlers’ language development
- Repeat and expand on what toddlers say. For example, if they say “water”, you can say “more water” or “water gone”. Adding more information can be a natural part of the back and forth of a conversation, and shouldn’t interrupt the flow of conversation.
- Make your language just challenging enough. It should enable the child to learn, but not be so complex that they become confused or lose interest in communicating.
- Don’t be afraid to ‘gift’ children new words occasionally. Rather than avoiding difficult or complex words, just explain them. New words build children’s understanding of ideas and concepts.
- Use the same concepts in different contexts, for example linking the water in the infant or toddler’s drink bottle, with the water in a puddle and from the taps. This enables infants and toddlers to develop much a richer concept of water than if they only ever hear “Drink your water”, for example.
- Support pronunciation by repeating what the child said using the right pronunciation.
- Encourage extended or longer conversations.
- Offer comments, rather than ‘test’ children’s knowledge with questions, because with comments you can give children more vocabulary, sentence structures and knowledge. However, you can ask toddlers open-ended questions and invite them to make choices. Narrate experiences or explain activities or routines.