

Language Development

“The only language men ever speak perfectly is the one they learn in babyhood, when no one can teach them anything!”-Maria Montessori

I think learning language as quickly and thoroughly as babies and toddlers do is one of the most amazing parts of being human. I love any chance I have to be a witness.

Babies first begin to communicate with us through mutual gazing. Then, very early in their development they begin to read our emotions. This is the beginning of our communication with them.

Babies move through stages of babbling. They begin with vowel sounds and then add consonants. . Joining your baby in babbling back and forth helps your baby to learn about the give and take and the connection that happens in conversation. “P” or “D” and “M” are early consonants. We think this is why some forms of “Dada” and “Mama” are almost universally used as the names for Father and Mother.

Six to nine month old infants learn to follow our eyes and then our gestures. When we look at something and name it, or point at something and name it, our babies use these clues to help decode our language. They also notice words that are repeated frequently and are able to use them to decode other words. For example, we may say, “Hi, baby”, “Pretty, Baby”, “Look at the happy Baby”. “Baby” begins to stand out as do the words that precede or follow it.

Humans all over the world naturally raise the pitch of their voices and elongate their words in sing-song like patterns whenever they talk to infants. This natural inclination on our part is wonderful support for babies and toddlers who are working to discover individual words within the stream of sounds they hear. This style of communication is often referred to as motherese or parentese.

Sometimes when we suggest avoiding baby talk, parents think we mean to stop babbling or using parentese. That is not the case; babbling and parentese are great for babies. However, it is unnecessary to change your vocabulary when you talk to babies and toddlers. In fact, the more vocabulary they hear the stronger their language development will be. Talk, talk, talk to your baby, using real words.

Babies usually understand many words and gestures before they begin using words themselves. It is of course very exciting to hear their first words. Some babies will initially use invented words. My first son, Alex, said “Bopie” when he wanted peanut butter. I think it is respectful and joyful to use those early words with your child.

There is a great deal of variation and the typical timing for first words can vary from before the first birthday until after the second. In general, most babies know about fifty words before they turn two. Fifty seems to be the watershed number. Once a toddler has that number of words there is usually an explosion into language with children averaging nine new words a day. This can be such an exciting time!

The one time we suggest using short sentences with simple words is when you are attempting to communicate a simple direction.

If you are interested in learning more about our most recent understanding of how infants learn language, I recommend Patricia Kuhl's Ted Talk

http://www.ted.com/talks/patricia_kuhl_the_linguistic_genius_of_babies.html