

Language Development

Target Audience: Parents & Family Members

Tone: Supportive & encouraging

Resource: [Language development in children: 0-8 years](#)

Overview:

Article should focus on why language is important and how best to support language development. It should also talk about how language skills develop at different ages (0-3) and what a parent/family member can do to best support development.

Helping Your Child Learn Language from 0 – 3 Can Be Fun and Rewarding

Language development is the ability to communicate, express and understand feelings. It is a big job for children ages 0 - 3. All communication and learning, including personal relationships, reading, writing, understanding and problem-solving, comes from this important first skill. Starting your infant or toddler off with a good language foundation helps them build strong brain connections they'll use for the rest of their life.

You may think that your infant isn't ready to learn any language skills yet. You may think they can't talk or understand what you are saying, so how can they possibly be ready? Actually, learning begins prenatally, and the first year of an infant's life is when they will gain the most skills, but they need your help to do it.

Start by just talking to your infant. Infants love sounds and your child already recognizes your voice. They've been listening to it since before they were born. They'll pay attention to your tone and rhythm of speech, even if they don't understand the words you say. Around the age of 4 to 6 months, your infant will start to experiment with purposely making their own sounds, like buzzing raspberries, and cooing and laughing. Over the next few months, they'll play with making loud and soft sounds, babbling, or nonsense that sounds like word patterns. They will also make other noises like a cough or clicking their tongue.

Encourage your infant's early language development by responding to them with smiles and positive expressions. Talk about what you are doing, for example, each step of getting them

dressed, putting one arm in their shirt, now the other arm. Point at things and talk about them. Tell them things like what it is, what color it is and what noise it makes. Have a pretend conversation with them, including pauses and inflection, as you would if they understand every word. Mimic the sounds they make and encourage them to “talk” back to you. They will enjoy trying to imitate words that have repeating sounds and soft consonant letters, like mama and dada, which is why these are frequently baby’s first words.

Around the time your child turns one, they’ll probably be able to say one word, and their vocabulary will grow over the next few months. Most of the words they learn will be nouns, or names for things that are important to them, like mama, dada or a sibling’s name. At this stage, they will start to understand what you are saying to them when you tell them it’s lunch time or ask for a kiss. They will also figure out how to say no pretty quickly. You’ll notice that your young toddler may use the same word to refer to several things; for example, they might call every toy a ball, or all vehicles may be a car.

Help your young toddler expand their use of words by showing them how to add on to what they know. If they say “apple,” ask them if they’d like an apple, or talk about the apple’s qualities-- the apple is round, or the apple is red. You’ll help them learn how words can be used in different ways and the meaning can expand. Your toddler will enjoy the fun of rhyming words, like bat, cat, mat, and also the sounds of repeating initial letters--ball, baby, bath--and they’ll learn that words may sound the same but have different meanings and uses, a very important language concept.

At age two, they can understand a lot of what you say, and make themselves understood to you. They can purposely put two words together in a miniature sentence, like “want milk” or “my ball.” Help them fill in the gaps by adding on to their two word sentence, for example, asking them “Do you want some milk?” They will also start using inflection and change the tone of their voice to add more meaning to what they say, for example, asking “where mama?” with a question tone instead of a statement tone. While you’ll know exactly what your toddler means as they learn to form words, other people may have trouble understanding. With time, their speech will become clearer and friends and neighbors will be able to carry on conversations with them.

As your toddler reaches age three, they’ll put together sentences that are made up of more words and string together more than one thought. They might say, “we went to the store and got bananas,” combining the thought of going to the store and what they did at the store. At this age, your toddler’s vocabulary is exploding. It seems like they learn a new word almost every day and understands even more of the words that you use. Keep talking to them, making your conversations richer by adding in details with description of color, pattern and texture. For instance, when you’re helping them get dressed, mention details like “let’s put on the blue shirt with the red flowers” and talk about the qualities of the shirt, describe if it’s soft or stiff, or say it’s warm.

Despite this rapid language growth, they probably won't understand how to use plural to talk about more than one of an item, or past tense to talk about things that happened previously. Your toddler will display their curiosity by asking you questions now, lots and lots of them, and they will also have the capability to talk about things and people who are not there, like a trip that happened earlier in the day, or Grandma, who visited yesterday, but isn't there now. Your child is still sorting out how to make their mouth say the words they hear, and you'll notice they might have trouble with combinations like "th" or "st" and occasionally mix up consonant sounds, like saying tinger, instead of finger. When this happens, don't interrupt them to correct it, just repeat what they said back in the right way. If they say they hurt their tinger, you might say, "Oh, you hurt your finger?" so they hear it correctly.

What else can you do to help your child turn into a full-fledged talker? Read to them every day and make it a fun activity you both look forward to. Reading helps your child learn the meaning and function of words, especially when you point to objects in the book and talk about them in addition to reading the text. Pointing to pictures helps reinforce that words represent objects and things, making the connection between the sound and the object, and it also helps them link written and spoken words together. For example, when you say "ball" and point to the picture of the ball, and show the written word ball, your baby will start to understand how all these forms of language express the same thing.

At different stages of your baby and toddler's development, they will enjoy different kinds of books. Babies love board books, and interactive books that have touch and feel elements. They will love to crinkle fabric books, and feel bumpy or scratchy surfaces, or flaps that lift. Board books are fairly indestructible, so they can explore the book without tearing pages.

Your older infant and young toddler will have fun interacting with books that have counting and alphabet themes, and give them a physical connection to stories, like a finger play or sing-song book. They will love hearing stories over and over again and will enjoy the anticipation of what comes next in her favorite books. As they get older and become more independent, let them hold books and turn pages and ask them to tell you what they think is happening in the story.

You can also use books to share stories and music that reflect your family's culture and introduce different culture or ideas to your infant or toddler.

Literacy development should be everyday fun activities: singing, talking, fingerplays, games, showing them pictures and objects, and using words to talk about them.

If your child's progress in talking or understanding language doesn't seem on track, let your pediatrician know. Pediatricians can see if there is a developmental delay and help you address it. In addition to wellness visits, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that children be screened for general developmental milestones at regular times. If you get help addressing language delays between birth and age 3, you can make a difference in your child's development well past the school age years. Talk with someone in your community who is familiar with services for young children in your area, call 1-800-EarlyOn, or visit [Early On](#).

For more information and ideas about how you can help your child learn and thrive, visit [MiKidsMatter](#).