

Language Development in Infants

The most intensive period of speech and language development for humans is during the first three years of life, a period when the brain is developing and maturing. These skills appear to develop best in a world that is rich with sounds, sights, and consistent exposure to the speech and language of others.

The beginning signs of communication occur during the first few days of life, when an infant learns that a cry will bring food, comfort, and companionship. The newborn also begins to recognize important sounds in his or her environment. A parent's voice can be one important sound. As they grow, infants begin to sort out the speech sounds (phonemes) or building blocks that compose the words of their language. Research has shown that by six months of age, most children recognize the basic sounds of their native language.

As the speech mechanism (jaw, lips, and tongue) and voice mature, an infant is able to make controlled sounds. This begins in the first few months of life, with "cooing" - a quiet, pleasant, repetitive vocalization. By six months of age, an infant usually babbles or produces repetitive syllables, such as "ba, ba, ba" or "da, da, da." Babbling soon turns into a type of nonsense speech (jargon) that often has the tone and cadence of human speech, but does not contain real words. By the end of their first year, most children have mastered the ability to say a few simple words. Children are most likely unaware of the meaning of their first words, but soon learn the power of those words as others respond to them.

Ways to foster language development in infants include :

- Place pictures in the diapering area—hang a few interesting pictures in the diaper area. Put them on the wall where baby can turn his/her head to see. Cover the pictures with clear contact paper so that baby can touch and pat them freely.
- Show pictures in a book—cuddle baby on your lap or close to you. Hold a book with simple, clear, colorful pictures so that both of you can see. Turn pages for baby. Talk softly about what you see as you point to the pictures.
- Model reading—when you read things as part of your work throughout the day, call baby's attention to what you're doing. Show her the thing you're reading. Tell her what you are doing.

Example:

"How do I make this cereal for you?" "Hmm. Let me read the directions."

"See the directions on the box?" "I'm reading them."

"They tell me how to make your cereal."

- Ask and show—put a few familiar things in a dishpan for baby to see. Try a shoe, a ball, and a big wooden spoon. Ask baby where one of the things is, then pick it up to show him/her. Example:
"Where's the spoon?" "Here it is! Spoon."
- Talk to a mirror—look into a mirror with baby so that he/she can see himself/herself and you. See if he/she will watch your reflection as you talk. Example:
"I see you, Amanda." "There you are." "I see you in the mirror."
Make some funny faces in the mirror. See if baby will copy you in her own way.
- Make sounds that baby knows—remember a sound baby likes to make like "ba-ba" or "ma-ma." When he/she is quiet, say the sound to baby. See if he/she will answer you with the same sound. Change the sound a little by making it quiet or loud, fast or slow, high or low. Watch baby's face to see what he/she thinks of these changes.
- Play music in your home---try different kinds and different volumes (but not too loud)---which excite?, which soothe? Dance with baby to fast music (being careful not to shake or throw in the air), and to

slow music. Sing songs you remember from your childhood. See if your baby will try to sing or vocalize with you. Sing along with the radio. As you work around the house, take baby with you and make up silly songs about what you are doing. Do the same while you are diapering or bathing baby.

- Consistently sign two or three words to baby while you also say the word. "More", "eat", and "milk" are good first signs. Some experts suggest starting signing around six months of age but not having any expectation that baby can sign back to you for three or four more months.
- If you are bilingual, expose baby to the second language. Babies learn language best through a relationship with a caring adult—not DVD's or television.

The following is a checklist to assess how your baby's speech, hearing and language are developing. If you can answer "yes" to all the questions, your child is developing normally. If you answer one or two questions "no", your child may have delayed speech, hearing and language development. If you answer three or more questions "no", you need to take action and have your child professionally evaluated.

AGE	HEARING & UNDERSTANDING	TALKING
Birth	Does your child listen to speech? Does your child startle or cry at noises? Does your child awaken at loud sounds?	Does your child make pleasure sounds? When you play with your child does he/she look at you, look away, and then look again?
0 to 3 months	Does your child turn to you when you speak? Does your child smile when spoken to? Does your child seem to recognize your voice and quiet down if crying?	Does your child repeat the same sounds a lot (cooing, going)? Does your child cry differently for different needs? Does your child smile when he/she sees you?
4 to 6 months	Does your child respond to "No" or changes in your tone of voice? Can your child look around for the source of new sounds - the doorbell, vacuum, dog barking? Does your child notice toys that make sounds?	Does your child's babbling sound more speech-like with lots of different sounds, including P, B, M? Does your child tell you (by sound or gestures) when he/she wants you to do something again? Does your child make gurgling sounds when left alone?
7 to 12 months	Does your child enjoy games like peek-a-boo, and pat-a-cake? Does your child turn or look up when you call his/her name? Does your child listen when spoken to? Does your child recognize words for common items - cup, shoe, milk? Has your child begun to respond to requests - "Come here", "Want more?"	Does your child's babbling have both long and short groups of sounds, such as ta-ta, up-up, b-b-b, d-d-d-d? Does your child imitate different speech sounds? Does your child use speech or non-crying sounds to get and keep your attention? Does your child have one or two words: bye-bye, ma-ma, da-da, no (although they may not be clear)?

Resources:

1. Dr. Patricia Kuhl, University of Washington
2. National Institute on Deafness and other Communication Disorders www.nidcd.nih.gov
3. Family Information Services, ISSN 1042-0878