

Eyes on



Language

Your Baby's First Steps
Toward Learning to Speak



CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE FOR CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

Early Childhood Development



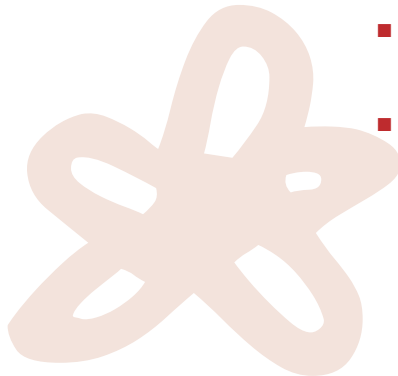
“From the age of six months on, he will try to communicate and begin initiating exchanges.”

What do we know?

- Your baby is born ready to learn language! His brain has special structures that enable him to learn about sounds, words and sentences when you speak to him. Even before he was born, he learned to recognize your voice and wanted to listen to you.
- Language develops in three areas:
 - speech sounds
 - words or vocabulary
 - sentence structure or grammar
- Your child may learn at a different rate in each area.

Speech sounds

- Your baby learns a lot about the sounds of language in his first year. From the day he is born he can hear almost any speech sound.
- As early as 5 months old, your baby already understands some new words.
- From the age of six months on, he will try to communicate and start initiating exchanges.
- In his first six months of life, he will start gesturing when he cries, babbling and playing by making sounds.





“A child's vocabulary usually includes about 50 words at 18 months, 100 words at 20 months and 14,000 words at 6 years.”

- By the end of the first year, your baby will pay special attention to sounds that are important in the language or languages that you speak. He will ignore sounds that are not used in your language.
- By the time your baby is one year old, he should also be babbling, making sounds that begin with a consonant and a vowel. He will later repeat these syllables (for example, ‘bababa’ and ‘mamama’). These are the foundation for the first real words that your baby will say.
- By the end of his first year, your baby will start to master the basics of language. He will say his first words as he becomes more curious, as he develops his senses and is able to move around freely.
- Your baby may not say his first words correctly, but a stranger should be able to understand half of what he says at age 2, and all of what he says at age 4.

Vocabulary skills

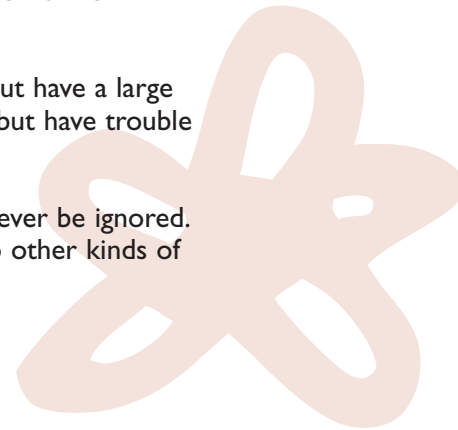
- Your baby's vocabulary skills develop very quickly. Babies can understand some words as early as 5 months and will say their first word between 10 and 12 months.
- A child's vocabulary usually includes about 50 words at 18 months, 100 words at 20 months and 14,000 words at 6 years.



“Your child will begin to put two, then three and more words together into short sentences at approximately 24 months of age.”

Sentence structure and grammar

- Your child will begin to put two, then three and more words together into short sentences at approximately 24 months of age.
- Your child will start to make complex sentences some time before age 2 and will have learned this skill by age 4.
- Your child can learn some of the letters of the alphabet and the sounds that go with those letters before he begins kindergarten. This will help him learn to read.
- Your four year old can learn that words such as ‘boat’ and ‘bear’ start with the same sound or that the words like ‘rat’ and ‘cat’ rhyme.
- One child might make a lot of speech errors but have a large vocabulary. Another child might speak clearly but have trouble understanding what people say.
- Problems with language development should never be ignored. Language delay can last a long time and lead to other kinds of problems that may need treatment.



Paying attention to...

What can be done?

... strategies that help develop language (warm contact, speaking to your baby often). The way you talk and interact with your baby plays an important role in how he will learn to speak.

- During your daily routine, spend some one-on-one time with your baby, and speak to him often.
- Get your baby's attention by speaking to him softly and close to his face.

... the vocabulary that babies develop in their first year. Even though babies do not say many words, they understand a lot. The size of their vocabulary depends greatly on the amount of time that you, and others who are close to your child, spend naming objects.

- Repeat the same words often.
- Point to and name the same object often. Be sure that your baby is looking at the object when you name it.

... the fact that babies remember words more easily when they are repeated often.

- During daily activities with your baby (feeding, changing diapers, bathing), name objects in the nearby surroundings in a playful voice. Repeat often.
- Name and describe any objects that your baby points to and gives his attention to.

... the importance of giving your child stimulating experiences. These experiences will help him learn language.

- Encourage him when he makes a sound or word (repeat it, and ask him questions to keep the conversation going).

Paying attention to...

What can be done?

... the fact that your baby is more open to learning when he is having fun.

- Play word and sound games. For example, hide an object under a blanket. Then make the object reappear while naming it.
- Be enthusiastic and encourage your child when he tries to talk.
- Show interest, with smiles and congratulations, when your child is interested in an object. Use this opportunity (his interest) to talk about the object.

... the fact that the more your child hears language, the faster he is likely to learn more words and develop his language skills.

- Help your child learn language by talking to him while playing with him.
- Encourage him to explore the world through movements (running, climbing) and by using his senses (touching different textures, smelling flowers, tasting sweet and salty foods).
- Talk to him while you help him learn to solve problems (opening a container, stacking blocks, etc.).

Paying attention to...

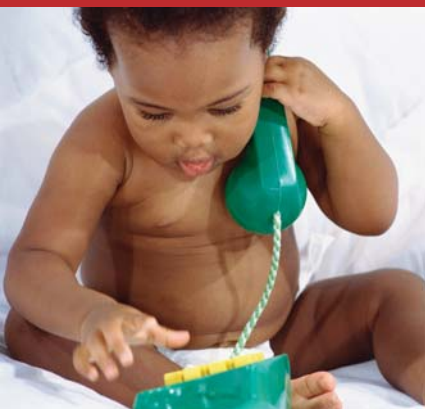
... the fact that the language experiences you give your child when he is young will prepare him for school.

What can be done?

- Help your child for school by:
 - making learning activities part of your daily routine. For example, read to your child every day.
 - responding to your child's efforts to communicate. For example, name actions or objects when your child gestures or makes sounds to show his interest in them.
 - providing complex explanations when your child asks questions.
 - helping your child tell detailed stories about his experiences.
 - providing learning materials such as appropriate toys, art materials, books and writing tools.

... the fact that problems with language development should never be ignored.

- You should be concerned if your child says less than 40 to 50 words by 24 months of age, especially if there is a family history of language or reading problems.
- Talk to your pediatrician, family doctor or a speech-language pathologist if you have any concerns.



Information

The Centre of Excellence for Early Childhood Development identifies and summarizes the best scientific work on the social and emotional development of young children. It disseminates this knowledge to a variety of audiences in formats and languages adapted to their needs.

For a more in-depth understanding of language development and literacy, consult our experts' articles in the Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development, available free of charge at www.child-encyclopedia.com.

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