



by Karen Stephens

Early Experiences Lay Foundation for Language Growth

Communicating through spoken and written language is one of the most important skills your child will ever master. With these skills they'll develop, nourish, and maintain social attachments that will support them a lifetime, first within the family, then beyond. Through communication they will learn to understand themselves as well as others.

To master language children must do more than learn to pronounce a basic vocabulary and then be able to spell it. The basics of any language include the ability to listen, speak, read, and write. Competence and versatility in all four areas equip children with tools they need to make sense of a lifetime of experiences and relationships.

Children first achieve "receptive" language. That means they listen to, focus on, and then make sense of sounds. In the beginning, kids understand far more language than they can produce. In time, children begin to notice that predictable sounds are combined to make words that have meaning to another person. It takes a little more time before they realize the words are combined into sentences meant to communicate complex thoughts, ideas, and emotions.

With maturation and experience, children next develop "expressive" or spoken language. They first produce sounds, then words, and then sentences to get their needs and wants met. Soon they're labeling everything in sight, just to prove that they KNOW what something is! There's unmistakable pride as children grasp a shared language. Before that, who knows what kids think. Maybe they assume each person has her OWN language. It must be an enormous relief when toddlers finally "de-code" meanings behind the sounds of language.

Experiences during the first years of life lay a foundation for all language growth. But mom or dad, don't let that overwhelm you. Auspicious beginnings start out small; a caring and responsive parent is exactly what's needed to nudge the process along.

Most often, parents instinctively interact with and speak to capture an infant's interest. We lean in close so brand new eyes can easily focus on our faces. We gaze to maintain eye contact and affirm our loving intentions. We comfort with loving touch and soothing sounds so language is blanketed in warmth and pleasant feelings. And we become skilled at "parent-ese" — you know, that slightly higher pitched, simplified way of talking to infants that every parent almost unknowingly slips into.

As days go by, we exaggerate facial expressions and smile bigger each time our baby responds in kind. When baby coos or croons, we mimic the sounds; and we balance our vocalizations with baby's. That dance of give and takes introduces babies to the rhythm of human speech — a rhythm we take for granted but babies find mesmerizing.

To decipher language, children listen to differences and similarities in sounds and facial expressions. Next they learn that different sounds represent different things;

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for instance, foot steps means mom is coming, heavier ones means it's pop. (Either are especially welcome if the baby is waiting for a 2 a.m. feeding!)

Language comprehension blooms when it's paired with specific events or activities. Diapering, bathing, feeding, dressing, and play time are daily routines that give parents and caregivers abundant opportunities to expose children to meaningful language. Through varied experiences geared to children's development and repeated rituals — like bedtime reading — children rapidly acquire language. It's actually pretty amazing. Only 24 months on the planet and most kids grasp language. Of course, that does mean the house will never be quiet again. It's a gift you'll never be sorry you gave them.

So, today I offer ideas for developing kids' language. Since it's best to take first things first, I start with listening and speaking skills. They're not in any order, just ideas to put into practice.

- Listen to infant's vocalizations and respond with facial expressions and comments back — even if you don't have a clue as to the topic. As children grow, talk WITH children, not at them. Don't overwhelm kids with a barrage of endless talk just for the sake of talking. Instead, especially during daily routines, use meaningful talk to describe what you are doing and why.
- Listen to different types of sounds, whether they are made by nature or humans. Kids love mimicking truck sounds or animal noises.
- Extend children's dialogue. If your child points and says, "Ball." Respond with a little more language to model complete sentences and use of descriptive words: "Yes, that's a big red ball. Let's go get it."
- Sing, make up songs, and play with sound shakers and music makers. Have kids match sound shakers. Or they can identify names of tape-recorded sounds. Play soothing classical music during dinner or naptime.
- Read nursery rhymes out loud or act them out. Recite fingerplays like "Itsy Bitsy Spider." (Your library has great resources.) Play with language until it tickles their funny bones.
- Everyday, leisurely read a book together. Let the child point to pictures, mimic text, or supply sound effects. You don't even have to read the words, simply look through books and identify items. Read letters from extended family out loud.
- Provide lots of hands on experiences to talk about. Take children on errands and talk about what they see and hear in town. Talk with neighbors and friends. Go to the zoo, library, farm, children's museum — anywhere there are things to capture your child's interest.
- Keep the television off during dinnertime — and preferably for the rest of the day, too. Delays in language increase as children spend their hours in front of the television!
- When giving directions, use detailed language. Instead of pointing and saying, "Give me that," distinctly say, "Hand me the brush on your dresser and we'll brush your hair."
- Play listening games. For instance, tell a story but add a twist: "The cow swam over the moon." See how many mistakes the kids can catch. Or hide a timer in a room. Once it chimes, have the kids try to find it just by listening. Play Simon Says, but add positional adjectives: "Simon says put your hat ON your head" or "BEHIND your back" and so on.
- Offer language rich play opportunities. Invite friends over so kids can play dress up, or play with puppet and dolls. Provide blocks and toy accessories, so kids can make up stories, like what happens on the farm they build. Tape record their play and listen later.
- Ask more than just "yes" or "no" questions. Open-ended questions encourage children to use more elaborate language. For instance, say out loud, "Now I wonder how that cat knocked that plant over? Do you have any ideas?"
- Use wh questions when asking about children's days; they encourage more discussion: "What did you do on your field trip?", "Which games did you like best?"

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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