



Stimulating Language Development

Most children begin to speak around the age of 10 to 18 months. However, their understanding of words starts long before that. Hearing word sounds stimulates children's brains to grow so that they can remember and repeat these sounds. Children also begin to understand the rhythms and patterns of speech.

As children listen, watch and participate in the world around them, they begin to master language. Their experiences in child care are an important part of language development. An interesting, enriched environment makes a difference. There are many things you can do to help children build a solid foundation for a lifetime of self expression.

Meet the Match Developmentally

Pay attention to where children are developmentally and move forward as they do, using more complicated language as they are ready for it. Repeat and match words and sounds from the child. Always answer children's questions patiently and fully.

Tie Words to Actions

Self-talk. Describe what you are doing and how you are doing it, including new words and ideas. *"I am using my hands to mix the color violet into the playdough."*

Parallel talk. Describe the child's actions as she does them. *"You're pulling the long train down the windy track."*

Imitation. Encourage children to imitate your words or phrases if they want to.

Expanding. Expand on things children say. For example, if a child says *"kitty nice,"* you could follow with, *"Yes, the kitty is soft and gray."*

Prompting. If a child doesn't answer a question, change your question. For example, if you said, *"Where did you go?"* you could restate it as *"You went where?"*

Make Language Clear

Use simple, clear speech and speak to children directly. Make eye contact, and give them time to respond. Be very specific when you give directions, such as *"Please put these crayons with the other crayons on the green shelf."*

Describe and Label

Introduce new words in a meaningful way, such as talking about what you are seeing and doing. Have children describe and label things, encouraging them to make connections themselves. For example, have them taste sugar and salt and then have them describe the differences. Use real objects to teach new words, and let children feel the object when you name it.

Communicate Without Words

Act out stories or situations and meanings of words without words. *"Pretend you are carrying the biggest log you ever saw."* *"Show me 'sad' with your face."*

Thinking in Sequences

Teach children that things are often done in a certain order. *"What happens if we put our shoes on before our socks?"* You can also ask children to do things in order, as in *"Jonathan, please push in your chair, put your trash in the garbage, and wash your hands."*

Ask Open-Ended Questions

Offer choices that get more than a "yes" or "no" answer. *"What would happen if...?"* *"Can you tell me how you made your sand castle?"*

Help Children Reason

Encourage children to talk about **why** they do things in a certain way. Ask questions that encourage problem-solving skills. For example, if together you see a person fixing a fence, you could ask the child, *"How do you think the fence became broken?"* and *"How is the man going to solve the problem of a broken fence?"*

Teach Time and Space Words

Use objects found in the child care setting (blocks, dolls, etc.) to talk about space relationships such as *in front of, behind, over, under, next to*, etc. You can also use objects to talk about comparisons: *Which is bigger, tallest, widest*, etc. Use time and space words like *nearer, soon, later, and after*.

Activate Children’s Listening Skills

Make “silly” mistakes on purpose, such as “*Airplanes fly under water.*” “*Is this my (point to knee) nose?*” Play games where mistakes are obvious, such as “*The wheels on the bus go oink, oink, oink.*” Give different instructions than normal, and see if the children catch the difference.

Make Connections Between Written and Spoken Language

Help children sign their own work—even if it’s only a letter or an attempt at writing their name.

Read in Groups and Individually

Read to the children every day. Go through books and talk about the pictures: discuss the names of objects seen in the pictures, describe the actions taking place and the feelings and emotions on the character’s faces, and ask children questions about what is happening in the stories. Create a comfortable book corner with a variety of reading materials available within children’s reach.

Help Children Make Up and Retell Stories

Ask children to tell you a story about what they are doing or have done, such as “*T.J., tell me about what you are drawing.*” Make up stories and/or poetry and share, or have children make up stories and/or poetry that you write down and read back to them.

Help Children Learn Positive Social Skills

Teach and model courteous ways of speaking with others, such as using “*please*” and “*thank you.*” Help children understand the variety of emotions they feel by reading and telling stories about characters that express emotions, encouraging discussions about feelings, and showing children that you understand and appreciate their feelings.

Keep Talk/Attitudes Toward Language Positive

Use praise and encouraging words, but be specific, such as “*Thank you for helping me clear the table.*” Accept word mistakes as part of the developmental

process. Do **not** correct children; instead, model proper usage. For example, if the child said, “*dog run,*” you could say, “*Yes, the dog is running.*”

Use Music

Make up songs and chants, including rhymes, and sing them repeatedly.

Listen to and Talk with Children

Encourage children to communicate verbally by paying attention to all communication attempts, and by taking special time to be with, talk to and listen to each child daily.

Remember that there is great variation in when children will begin to speak. Language can develop smoothly and continuously, or in jumps and spurts. And because the development of speech varies, it is important *not* to compare one child’s language development to another’s. If you suspect a child is having a delay in either understanding or using language, discuss your concerns with the child’s parents and encourage them to talk with their family health care provider. He or she may evaluate the child, or refer the family to professionals who specialize in speech and language evaluation. The parents may also contact their local school district to request a speech and language assessment for their child.

Resources

Reach Out and Read (2013). <https://reachoutandread.org/what-we-do/resources-2/Milestones-of-early-literacy-development> https://pediatriccarectr.com/wp-content/uploads/parenting/literacy/milestoneschart_english.pdf

AAP (2019). *How young children learn language and speech* <https://publications.aap.org/pediatricsinreview/article/40/8/398/35313/How-Young-Children-Learn-Language-and-Speech>

National Academy of Sciences. (2017). *Promoting the educational success of children and youth learning English: Promising futures.* <https://nap.nationalacademies.org/catalog/24677/promoting-the-educational-success-of-children-and-youth-learning-english>

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