

Tips on Helping Your Child Learn To Talk

zerotothree.org, March 2008

Learning to talk is a process that starts at birth, when your baby experiences how voices can sound. By two years, most babies have a large vocabulary and can put words together to express their needs and ideas. Let's see how this process unfolds and what you can do to encourage your baby's ability to communicate.

From birth to three months, your baby listens to your voice. He coos and gurgles and tries to make the same sounds you make. You can help your baby learn how nice voices can be when you:

- Sing to your baby. You can do this even before he is born! Your baby will hear you.
- Talk to your baby. Talk to others when she is near. She won't understand the words, but will like your voice and your smile. She will enjoy hearing and seeing other people, too.
- Plan for quiet time. Babies need time to babble and play quietly without TV or radio or other noises.

From three to six months, your baby is learning how people talk to each other. You help her become a "talker" when you:

- Hold your baby close so he will look in your eyes. Talk to him and smile.
- When your baby babbles, imitate the sounds.
- If he tries to make the same sound you do, say the word again.

Between six and nine months, your baby will play with sounds. Some of these sound like words, such as "baba" or "dada." Baby smiles on hearing a happy voice, and cries or looks unhappy on hearing an angry voice. You can help your baby understand words (even if she can't say them yet) when you:

- Play games like Peek-a-Boo or Pat-a-Cake. Help her move her hands along with the rhyme.
- Give him a toy and say something about it, like "Feel how fuzzy Teddy Bear is."
- Let her see herself in a mirror and ask, "Who's that?" If she doesn't respond, say her name.
- Ask your baby questions, like "Where's doggie?" If he doesn't answer, show him where.

Between nine and twelve months, your baby will begin to understand simple words. She stops to look at you if you say “no-no.” If someone asks “Where’s Mommy?” she will look for you. She will point, make sounds, and use her body to “tell” you what she wants. For example she may look up at you and lift her arms up to show you she “wants up.” She may hand you a toy to let you know she wants to play. You can help your baby “talk” when you: Show him how to wave “bye-bye.”

- Tell him “Show me your nose.” Then point to your nose. He will soon point to his nose. Do this with toes, fingers, ears, eyes, knees and so on.
- Hide a toy while she is watching. Help her find it and share in her delight.
- When he points at or gives you something, talk about the object with her. “You gave me the book. Thank you! Look at the picture of the baby rolling the ball.”

Between twelve and fifteen months, babies begin to use words. This includes using the same sounds consistently to identify an object, such as “baba” for bottle or “juju” for juice. Many babies have one or two words and understand 25 or more. He will give you a toy if you ask for it. Even without words, he can ask you for something—by pointing, reaching for it, or looking at it and babbling. You can help your child say the words she or he knows when you:

- Talk about the things you use, like “cup,” “juice,” “doll.” Give your child time to name them.
- Ask your child questions about the pictures in books. Give your child time to name things in the picture.
- Smile or clap your hands when your child names the things that he sees. Say something about it. “You see the doggie. He’s sooo big! Look at his tail wag.”

Between fifteen and eighteen months, your child will use more complex gestures to communicate with you and will continue to build her vocabulary. She may take your hand, walk you to the bookshelf, point to a book and say “buk” to say, “I want to read a book with you.” You can help your child talk with you when you:

- Talk about what your child wants most to talk about. Give him time to tell you all about it.
- Ask about things you do each day—“Which shirt will you pick today?” “Do you want milk or juice?”
- Build on what your child says. If he says “ball,” you can say, “That’s your big, red ball.”
- Introduce pretend play with your child’s favorite doll or toy animal. Include it in your conversations and your play. “Rover wants to play too. Can he roll the ball with us?”

Between eighteen months and two years, your baby will be able to follow directions and begin to put words together, such as “car go” or “want juice.” She will also begin to do pretend play which fosters language development. You can spur your child’s communication skills when you:

- Ask your child to help you. For example, ask her to put her cup on the table or to bring you her shoe.
- Teach your child simple songs and nursery rhymes. Read to your child. Ask him to point to and tell you what he sees.
- Encourage your child to talk to friends and family. She can tell them about a new toy.
- Engage your child in pretend play. You can talk on a play phone, feed the dolls or have a party with the toy animals.

Between two and three years, your child’s language skills will grow by leaps and bounds. He will string more words together to create simple sentences, such as “Mommy go bye-bye.” He will be able to answer simple questions, such as “Where is your bear?” By 36 months he will be able to answer more complicated questions such as, “What do you do when you are hungry?” He will do more and more pretend play, acting out imaginary scenes, such as going to work, fixing the toy car, taking care of his “family” (of dolls, animals.)

You can help your child put all his new words together and teach him things that are important to know when you:

- Teach your child to say his or first and last name.
- Ask about the number, size and shape of the things your child shows you.
- Ask open-ended questions that don’t have a “yes” or “no” answer. This helps them develop their own ideas and learn to express them. If it’s worms, you could say: “What fat, wiggly worms! How many are there?...Where are they going? Wait, watch and listen to the answer. You can suggest an answer if needed: “I see five. Are they going to the park or the store?”
- Ask your child to tell you the story that goes with a favorite book. “What happened to those three pigs?” Reading spurs language development. Take him to storytime at your local library. Your toddler will enjoy sharing books with you as well as peers.
- Do lots of pretend play. Acting out stories and role-playing create rich opportunities for using, and learning, language.
- Don’t forget what worked earlier. For example, your child still needs quiet time. This is not just for naps. Turn off the TV and radio and let your child enjoy quiet play, singing and talking with you.

(Note: This information was adapted, with permission, from *Learning Link: Helping Your Baby Learn to Talk*, by C.E. Morrisset Huebner and P. Lines, 1994, Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement.)

###