

Language Development in Toddlers

By Janelle Durham, MSW. Parent Educator. www.GoodDaysWithKids.com

Developmental Milestones

Individual children vary, based on gender, temperament, and caregivers' language use, but here are some typical average milestones for language development:

- At one year old, your child might understand 50 words and say a few.
- Around 20 – 24 months, they may understand 150 – 200 words, and speak 50 – 150. Somewhere in the period, they'll have a huge growth spurt in language knowledge, called 'fast mapping' where they may learn up to 8 words a day!
- By 24 months, they speak 250 words. They can answer some questions, ask questions, name many familiar objects in the house, and can ask for what they want.
- By 30 months, they understand 500 words. Speak 250-500, saying them more clearly so others can understand. Use 2 word sentences. Can begin to talk about how they feel.
- By 3 years, they speak in full sentences. Begin to figure out grammatical rules.
- By kindergarten, children may know 10,000 words.

Help them learn

How to talk: When speaking directly to a baby or very young toddler we use "parentese", also known as "baby talk". We establish eye contact, slow our speech down, simplify language, and vary our tone a lot, in a bright, happy, sing-songy voice. This makes language very interesting to the child, engaging, and emotionally satisfying.

As the child gets older, we still use aspects of this, but we shift gradually over time to a more mature way of speaking, with more mature speech style, full sentences and more complex vocabulary.

What to talk about:

- Describe events and actions – what the child is doing and how they are doing it. This teaches verbs and adverbs: "you are running fast", "you're touching that kitty very gently."
- Describe objects in the room and things they're interacting with. This teaches nouns and adjectives: "that's a big ball", "that's a red car". Ask "can you point to the picture of a goat?"
- Use lots of details, but keep sentences short and simple. Repetition reinforces new words.
- Ask questions, then pause and wait for child to respond verbally or non-verbally. "Do you want more peas?" Repeat (or verbalize) their response: "Yes, I see you reaching for more peas."

Research has shown that children learn language best when the parents tune into what the child is interested in the moment and talk about that. Or as Bronson and Merryman say "the central role of the parent is not to push massive amounts of language *into* the child's ears. Rather, the central role of the parent is to notice what's coming *from* the child and respond accordingly."

Some parents just throw language at kids: "Look, over there is a window. Outside, I see blue sky, and trees, and birds. Next to the window, there's a bookshelf. There are red books and green books..." If their attention is elsewhere, those words are mere background noise. A more effective parent notices their child is reaching for a crumb and talks about that. When a dog barks and the child looks up, the parent says "Did you hear the dog bark? I did too." Timing is essential – talking about the thing they are *currently* focusing on, not on what held their attention 30 seconds ago.

Listening and responding

As our children begin to communicate, they need us to show that we are listening and responding.

- Let your child tell you stories, and respond as they do
- Pay attention as your child speaks
- Repeat your child's words. Add to what she has said. If she says "doll", you say "you have a doll." If she points and says "horse", you say "horse, yes, that's a white horse."
- DON'T correct your child. This can cause the child to feel self-conscious and worried about using language. Instead, use repetition of their words, where you use the correct form of the word... If your child says "we runned to the playground" you can say "Yes, we ran very fast." Or if she says "I love p'sketti", you say "I love spaghetti too!"

Who talks to your child?

Research has shown that if only one person says a new word to a child, even if they say it many times, the child might not learn the word. If multiple people say the new word to the child, even just once each, the child learns the new word. So, try to expose your child to multiple speakers.

Vary your words, but not too much

When you say "You have a toy. Can you give me the toy? Thank you for giving it to me." you have just illustrated verbs (have, give, and giving), pronouns (you and me) and that you can use the indefinite article "it" to refer to a toy. That's a lot of language learning, but it works because it's a natural, easy follow-able flow of thoughts. Variety in speech is great, but be careful not to go too far.

If you say "Are you thirsty? Does Bobby want milk? Or can I get my little guy a glass of water?" those sentences may have nothing in common with each other from a toddler's perspective. Try "Do you want a drink? I can get you a drink of milk or water. Milk? OK, here is your milk to drink."

Games and activities to build language skills

- Say nursery rhymes together. As your child gets older, make up new verses together. (Great source for rhymes and songs: <https://kcls.org/content/>)
- Sing songs. This is an excellent way to build vocabulary through repetition.
- Play games with physical responses so you can see they understand you: "Can you touch your elbow?" "Put your hand on your tummy." "The toy is hiding *under* the table – can you find it?"
- Ask questions that have "right answers" they can memorize and repeat for a sense of mastery. The classic game is "What does a dog say? What does a cat say?"
- Play telephone – pretend to talk to each other on the phone, taking turns in conversation.
- Pretend that a toy or stuffed animal is talking to your child. Encourage them to respond.
- Ask your child to tell you stories about their day, or re-tell the storyline of their favorite book.
- Emotion coaching includes labelling emotions. As a child gains words to describe his feelings, the feelings can seem more manageable.

Resources:

Language for Learning: a video for child care providers, showing how simple it is to encourage language learning www.youtube.com/watch?v=7DPHlQh91Mw&list=WLSMLXfBPSxoG3J_FkZGqnxVV2P34cr_S

Talking Toddlers: 7 tips to help develop language skills (or read Nurture Shock by the same authors, Bronson and Merryman) <https://www.goodmorningamerica.com/news/story/tips-toddlers-develop-language-skills-9491324>