

# Language Learning – How You Can Help

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The best way to ensure your child can understand lots of words, and can express themselves clearly with a variety of words is to speak to your child, read to them, and sing with them. A lot. However, don't feel like you have to *talk non-stop* for hours... not only would that be exhausting for you... think how over-stimulating it would be for your child!

Instead of trying to maximize *how much* you talk, be smart about *how* you talk to your child.

Bronson and Merryman say "For years, the advice has been the way to kick-start a child's language learning was to simply expose kids to massive amounts of language. However, the newest science has concluded the central role of the parent is not to push massive amounts of language *into* the child's ears. Rather, the central role... is to notice what's coming *from* the child and respond accordingly."

## What Is Responsive Language – An Example

Imagine a toddler is eating breakfast. Let's listen to different ways a parent might talk to that child:

- As the child is focusing on getting their cereal onto their spoon, one parent talks all about all their plans for the day, "As soon as you're done with breakfast, we're going to put your new red shoes on and we'll go for a walk, and maybe we'll see some butterflies again. Remember, the last time we went to the bakery to buy bread and we saw two blue butterflies? Then when we come back home for nap time, I'll read *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. He becomes a butterfly." The child does not look up – still focused on getting the cereal on the spoon.
- As the toddler explores their food, the parent says "you're poking your cheerios with your finger." The child pushes some into a pile, and looks up at the parent for a reaction. "You pushed them all into a big pile on that side of your dish." The parent points at the pile. The child pushes a few more cheerios over. "You pushed five more cheerios into the pile." Then the child pats the spoon. "You're using your hand to pat the spoon. The spoon makes a fun noise, doesn't it?" The parent pats the spoon and says "Rattle, rattle." The toddler rattles the spoon some more, the parent says "rattle, rattle" again. Then the child holds up the spoon to show it to the parent. "You picked up the spoon – can you use it to eat your cheerios?"

In both examples, the parents speak 60 - 65 words. How much does the child take in?

In the first, the parent's voice is mostly irrelevant background noise for a child whose attention is elsewhere. There's also a chance of "criss-cross labeling" where if every time the child touches the spoon, the parent happens to talk about butterflies, the child could get confused about whether the metal utensil they're touching is called butterfly.

In the second example, the parent closely observed the child's actions and where the child's attention was focused, then talked about that. This gives the child the words for what they are experiencing *in the moment* with all their senses. This builds a much stronger connection between the words and their meaning. When you talk about a spoon later, the child can remember this moment and remember what the spoon felt like in their hand and the noise it made on the table.

To some parents, it may seem like talking about cheerios and a spoon is boring. They may feel like they need to jazz up the child's learning by talking about bigger ideas. But slowing down to your toddler's pace and tuning in to what they're exploring offers a meaningful connection for their learning.

There are three characteristics of responsive language: it's prompt (it happens within seconds of the child's behavior), it's contingent (related to the behavior) and it's appropriate (the parent responds in a positive and meaningful way). So, if a child showed a parent a ball, the parent would say, "Oh, you have a ball in your hand!" If the child said "ba", the parent would say "Ball. Yes, it's a green ball." If the child appears ready to throw the ball, the parent will say "Do you want to throw the ball? You could throw it in that big basket."

## How can you use responsive language?

Dr. Dana Suskind, author of [Thirty Million Words](#) recommends three steps:

1. **Tune In** by paying attention to what your child is focused on
2. **Talk** with your child using lots of descriptive words
3. **Take Turns** with your child by engaging in his or her conversation.

The Hanen Centre says step 1 is OWL: "**Observe Wait Listen**. The parent needs to give the child the opportunity to take that first turn, so that the parent has something to respond to." Next step is follow the child's lead: **imitate** what the child says, **interpret** (what the child would say if they had the words), **comment** (give the child words to describe what they are doing) or join in child-directed **play**.

Additional recommendations:

- When teaching new words, use parentese – that sing song high voice parents use for baby talk. But you don't have to talk that way all the time – use a normal voice for normal conversation.
- Use motion – point to things as you talk about them, touch them, shake them. All this helps the child focus their attention while you label the objects.
- Talk about what they want to talk about (what they are doing or are paying attention to in the moment). Don't change topics quickly.
- Don't interrupt their attempts to communicate with you. Wait for them to get their thought out. Look at their face to show you are listening.
- Children benefit from hearing lots of different people speak – at different pitches, tempos, and with different accents and facial expressions and gestures. So take them out in the world, so they have an opportunity to interact with diverse people.
- Reading to your child is also a huge influence on language learning.

## Does responsive language increase learning?

Studies have shown that when parents are responsive, their children reach language milestones sooner, such as imitating their parent's words, saying their first words, speaking 50 words, combining words to make a "sentence" and talking about the past. They hit some milestones 4 to 6 months earlier than the children of non-responsive parents. Children who experience more responsive speech – not just overheard speech – process language faster and learn words more quickly, which will help them to learn in school.