

Word Repetition Helps Babies Learn

by Virginia Bingham and Deborah Rock

Children come into the world with an innate capacity to learn the language they hear daily. The home is the natural place to learn and parents are the natural teachers. There are some quick and easy ways to help your child talk. These simple techniques take no extra time or preparation, but are powerful in their effect on language learning. You can help make it happen.

Babies learn to talk by first hearing words spoken over and over. They learn the meanings while watching everything around them and gradually “matching up” words with objects and activities. They practice with you or with others. Sometimes they practice alone. At first, you may hear your baby making sounds and babbling in the crib, later practicing sound combinations that resemble real words. One day, when your child is ready, you will hear the first recognizable and meaningful word.

The first thing you can do is talk to your baby, for example, while you are caring for her personal needs. Smile at her, make eye contact, and begin a sociable, even if one-sided, conversation. “Good morning, Mary. It’s a beautiful day today. You are our fine new baby and we are so lucky to have you in our house. Shall I sing for you?” At this stage, your smiles, voice and touch create the pleasant background for your child’s introduction to the world of companionship through words.

When your baby is a little older, you can add the technique of “talking along.” As your child watches you, talk to yourself out loud about what is happening. “I am putting on my shoes. One shoe on. Where is the other shoe? Here it is, under my chair.” You are providing your child with an opportunity to hear and match words with the activity he observes, enabling him to recognize how words sound and what they mean.

The same talk-along approach can be used to describe what your child is doing. “You are drinking your milk. Drinking milk. You drank it all. It is all gone, empty.” Don’t be afraid of repeating the same words many times. Your child will not get bored because she is so busy learning what you have to teach.

Later, when your child has begun to use some of the words he has heard you say so many times, you can add the idea of “expansion” to your talk-along chatter. He says, “Daddy shoe” and you say, “Yes, this is Daddy’s shoe. Daddy’s big brown shoe.” You are providing the model for your child to hear, leading him to move to the next stage of connecting words into sentences for expressing ideas. At this stage, when your child is bravely venturing to use some speech, be patient with her effort. She will not be perfect and she cannot hurry. Give her the time she needs to express her thought, look at her, kneel down to her level and be pleased and interested in what she is telling you.

Start early to read to your child. Introduce him to the world of printed words. When he is old enough to enjoy sitting with you to look at books for as little as five minutes, he is ready. Don’t force the issue; just offer, and day by day, lead him to look at the pictures, turn the pages and

listen to your “talk-along.” Begin reading short bits, and before long, your child will begin to fill in the right words of his favorite books, and even to correct your mistakes.

Your patience will be rewarded when your child begins to describe her unique view of the world—for the new moon, “Look Daddy, broken moon!” and “Mommy, paper blow away!” upon first introduction to a butterfly.

If you are concerned that your child is not understanding or using words as you would expect for his age, there are local resources for help and advice, including your pediatrician.

Look in the Yellow Pages under audiologists for concerns about hearing, and under speech pathologists for problems with learning to talk. Other resources in the community include the Early Childhood Coordination Agency for Referrals, Evaluations and Services (346-2578), the University of Oregon Speech-Language-Hearing Center (346-3593), local school districts and Direction Service Inc. (686-5060).

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