

## IN THIS ISSUE

### FEATURE ARTICLE:

Supporting Communication Language, and Literacy Learning With Infants and Toddlers

page 1

### CLASSROOM HINTS:

Benefits of Listening to Stories and Reading Aloud

page 11

### TRAINER TO TRAINER:

Reading and Storytelling With Infants and Toddlers

page 16

### NEWS BRIEFS

page 19

### ASK US

page 19

# Supporting Communication, Language, and Literacy Learning With Infants and Toddlers

BY SHANNON LOCKHART, HIGHSCOPE SENIOR EARLY CHILDHOOD SPECIALIST

Communication, language, and literacy learning for infants and toddlers take place within the context of trusting relationships. The bonding and connections that spontaneously occur between children and between children and adults directly supports and encourages communication and language. For those children who do not yet have language, nonverbal communication is just as important as verbal language is for the children who can talk. For all infants and toddlers, it is all about relationships, and communication and language skills develop through these strong relationships. This article begins with an overview of why infants and toddlers are motivated to communicate and learn language. We then

take a closer look at the importance of relationships in developing these capacities and two other keys to language learning for infants and toddlers — learning through sensory-motor experiences and providing a vocabulary-rich environment. We will also review some basic



The bonding and connections that spontaneously occur between children and between children and adults directly supports and encourages communication and language.

ways these young children begin to learn language, and describe how to support infants' and toddlers' language growth.

### The Drive to Communicate and Learn Language

Children, like people of all ages, are driven to communicate. For infants, their primary motivation is to communicate their needs: “I’m hungry, tired, cold, wet, bored, in pain,” and so on. Infants communicate these needs using their inborn capacities to cry, gesture, make facial expressions, and turn toward or away from something. These communication skills are generally effective, but at times don’t convey the real need. As caregivers, we do our best to interpret needs based on our intimate knowledge of each child, but sometimes we can only guess. Moreover, these ways of communicating carry a limited number of messages. They cannot communicate the child’s growing need to share discoveries, ask questions, and convey love, as well as to be more precise about needs — not merely “I’m hungry” but “I want cereal” and even “I want to feed myself!” Fortunately, humans have developed the capacity to communicate a wider and deeper range of feelings and thoughts. We call this capacity *language*.

As infants and toddlers hear language from the trusted adults who communicate with them on a daily basis, they are motivated to learn and use this wonderful communication tool. They reflect back the sounds and intonations their young ears are able to decipher, refining these into words as they repeatedly hear and begin to differentiate and reproduce them. This process is exciting for the child, as he or she becomes a more adept communicator. It is also exciting for adults as we get to know the children better, discover more about their inner lives, and provide them with the social-emotional, physical, and cognitive experiences they can now tell us they need and enjoy.

### Communication in Trusting Relationships

Consider the following two scenarios, in which a great deal of experimentation with communication and language is going on the whole time — all within the context of the relationships the children and teachers are establishing with each other.

#### Feeding time with Sierra

*It's feeding time, and you are holding Sierra (an infant) and feeding her a bottle while rocking back and forth. She stops sucking, and you look down at her with a smile; she in turn looks up with wide eyes and a smile back. You continue smiling at her and whisper a few words. She then spits the nipple out of her mouth and begins to coo with a big grin on her face as she reaches for your face. Her coos are short at first, but as you talk with a gentle voice using inflections and facial expressions, her coos become lengthier, and her smile turns into giggles. As you both continue communicating back*

#### PUBLISHER CREDITS

HighScope Extensions is a practical resource for early childhood teachers, trainers, administrators, and child care providers. It contains useful information on the HighScope Curriculum and on HighScope's training network.

Jennifer Burd  
Marcella Weiner  
Joanne Tangorra  
Editors

Katie Bruckner  
Assistant Editor/Assistant Web Specialist

Nancy Brickman  
Director of Publications

Kacey Beach  
Marketing Specialist

Sherry Barker  
Membership Manager

Kathleen Woodard  
Director of Marketing and Communication

Produced by HighScope Press, a division of HighScope Educational Research Foundation

ISSN 2155-3548

©2012 HighScope Foundation  
The HighScope Foundation is an independent, nonprofit organization founded by David Weikart in Ypsilanti, MI in 1970.

*and forth with inflections in your voices and wide facial expressions, it turns into a language game. This continues for a few more minutes, and then Sierra turns back to her bottle and continues sucking as she looks at you as you rock her back and forth.*

### **Reading with Gabriel**

*As children arrive in the morning, some are playing in the different areas while others are sitting on the floor with their parents as they transition into the room from home. You have some books lying by you, and Gabriel crawls over and picks up a book and puts it in your lap. You ask him if he wants you to read the book to him and he shakes his head up and down with a big smile. He crawls into your lap and you begin reading the story. As you turn the page, Gabriel frantically points to the dog and says “gahgee, gahgee, gahgee” at the top of his voice. You say “Yes, Gabriel, that is a doggie, and he looks a lot like your dog that you have at home.” You continue reading the story as he points to different animals and either sounds out their names or says the sounds the animals make like “yow, yow” for the kitten and “moooooo” for the cow. Also, you point to other animals while saying their names and the sounds they make. When you are done reading the book, Gabriel holds it in his hand and crawls across the floor to the toy area and pulls the tub of animals off the shelf and begins to play with them.*

The first key ingredient needed for language development to thrive is *communication in a trusting relationship* between the child and caregiver. Interactions should be nondirective and enjoyable, with the caregiver tuned into and responsive to the child’s needs and learning. Conversations between adult and child should be personal. It is important to get to know the child on a personal level (and vice-versa) as well as to be respectful in every interaction, whether it be a playful interaction (for example, Gabriel and his caregiver reading a book) or a routine task (for example, the “conversation” between Sierra and her caregiver during bottle-feeding).



Caregiving routines such as feedings and mealtimes, changing diapers, dressing, and naptimes provide rich opportunities for communication and language.

**Opportunities throughout the routine.** Throughout the day, communication is part of the give-and-take between caregiver and child. It is part of a joint relationship in which the patient caregiver listens intently, allowing time for the child to process his or her thoughts; communicate through gestures, signs, or words; and respond to what the caregiver contributes to the conversation or interaction. This includes caregiving routines such as bottle feedings/mealtimes, changing diapers and potty training, dressing, and naptimes. Caregiving routines should not be rushed or carried out in a mechanical way but seen as opportunities to build trust and have face-to-face communication with children about the feeding or diaper changing, for example, or just to enjoy playful back-and-forth verbal and nonverbal interactions.

**Active listening.** Adult listening is vital to children's language and intellectual development. Active listening means the adult attends to what the child does or says, neither ignoring it nor waiting to see or hear an expected response. If we want to support a child's desire to communicate, we must convey to the child that his or her communications are important and make a difference. We do this through active listening.

Consider the implications of this finding: In an international study on the quality of life for four-year-olds called the IEA Preprimary Project<sup>1</sup>, across 15 countries adults were found to listen to children only one percent to seven percent of the time. Even in the country where there was seven percent, the listening tended to be the adult listening to the child answering the adult's question. In other words, most communication went in one direction — from the adult to the child — and little was being done to support communication from the child.

By contrast, when we talk about *mutual* conversations and interactions, it is about caregivers listening to children's thoughts and ideas *and* commenting and responding to what children say — not about adults controlling the conversations. It is important to slow down and allow time for children to respond through gestures, babbles, words, or signs. Conversations containing shared interaction are important throughout the day and should be ongoing — and daily — even when the routine gets tight or highly variable, because infants and toddlers are always listening and learning from us.

**Varieties of communication.** Inside these trusted relationships and the various communications with caregivers that are part of them, young children hear voices with ranging intonation, sounds, syllables, and words — all of which are connected to learning and understanding speech. “Within this interactive social milieu, infants and toddlers learn to talk and lay the foundation for learning to read.... They initiate social interaction with trusted caregivers and peers, and in the process, construct a set of useful ideas:

<sup>1</sup>Olmsted, P. P., & Montie, J., (Eds.). (2001). *Early childhood settings in 15 countries: What are their structural characteristics?* Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press.

that communication is a give-and-take process; that you don't need words to convey and understand safety, acceptance, approval, and respect; that there are lots of ways to make your point; and that trusted people are interested in what you have to communicate and say" (Post, Hohmann, & Epstein 2011, pp. 43 & 45). A report from Zero to Three states, "Talking, reading and singing all stimulate children's understanding and use of language, and help them learn to become good communicators and eager readers" (Lerner & Ciervo, 2004, p. 2).

However, we need to remember that the kind of language young children hear significantly influences the extent to which they learn language. Nagy and Scott (2000) say that children need to hear new words many times throughout the day and in many different contexts in order to assimilate and accommodate the sounds and meanings into long-term memory. If the words are mainly "routine language" such as "time to change your diaper," "Are you ready for your bottle?,"

"Would you like more soup?" or rote questions such as "How many blocks do you have?" and "What color is this?" then we limit children's learning of vocabulary and language development. We want children to hear descriptive language, which we can offer to them by commenting on what they are doing (e.g., saying "You crawled all the way over here by yourself!" or "It feels squishy and cold"). As we do so, we can focus on using action words (e.g., "You are bouncing really fast" or "I see you hop, hop, hopping to the bathroom") and asking open-ended questions (e.g., "I wonder how that feels in your hands and between your toes?" or "Look how high that is — how did you get those blocks to stay so high?").

**Types of language.** Also, the type of language we use most often and at critical times of young children's language learning will determine *how* children learn language. As adults, we tend to "speak down" to infants and toddlers, and in some cases we use gibberish (e.g., saying "witty bitty baby boy" for "little bitty baby boy"), which is not helpful and can even impair how children learn to hear the sounds of letters and the pronunciation of words,



It is important for children to hear many different types of language in many different ways throughout the day.

even their own names. However, this does not mean that we should talk with infants and toddlers the way we would talk to adults — for if we do so, they will tend to tune out our relatively monotone voice and wordy speech.

Baby talk (e.g., “beddy-bye”; “di-dee” for diaper, etc.), is another type of speech that adults tend to use that is also referred to as child-directed speech (CDS) or motherese. Research reveals the value of this type of talk because it shows that baby talk fosters the emotional bonding process as well as the children’s mental development and indicates that it assists in learning the basic functions and structure of language (Gopnick, Meltzoff, & Kuhl, 1999).

This type of simplified speech pattern (e.g., “mama,” “dada,” “baba” for bottle, “nana” for grandmother, “jammies” for pajamas) helps children build their own schema by using forms that are recognizable as the actual words while getting children’s attention because of intonation and sounds that more closely match sounds the children are able to produce. This in turn aids in their language acquisition. CDS uses a fluctuation of the voice (glissando-like rises and falls of pitch), is slower than regular speech, has a special pronunciation of words, and includes affection and emotion as well as repetition (e.g., “bye-bye,” “pee-pee” or “poo-poo,” “aw oh,” “oopsie-daisy”).

Babies prefer CDS because it draws and holds their attention longer than does regular speech. Child-directed speech therefore plays an important role in the rate and quality of language acquisition for infants and toddlers. It also assists in vocabulary acquisition and better grammatical accuracy in babies (Apel, K., & Masterson, J. J., 2001). However, our speech needs to match and change with the developing speech patterns of the children we are working with so that we keep the language and vocabulary they are hearing at a slightly higher level than their own language capabilities. For example, if a child says “ba” for bottle, but repeatedly hears adults say “bottle,” the child gradually picks up the idea that the word has two syllables, each with a distinct sound, even before he or she is able to produce the word more accurately.

So, when we, as caring, responsive caregivers, talk with children respectfully, labeling and describing their experiences and the objects they engage with, and engaging them in everyday conversations that match and build on (scaffold) their increasing capabilities, infants and toddlers can acquire language skills and feel confident about their ability to communicate.

**Family culture and first experiences.** Think back to when you were a child. Think of the people you remember being close to and the experiences you remember having. What do you remember the most? What do friends and family members remember and describe about you as a child? What words do you remember learning and using? Perhaps you even remember the first word that you spoke. Our understandings and memories

of stories and experiences that we either remember or know of through our parents and relatives are intimately tied to how we learn language. For example, I remember being called “chubby cheeks” (cheeks I have never outgrown!), mainly by my dad. When I think of these words, a visual representation comes to mind of my dad taking his fingers and gently pinching my cheeks and shaking my head. I am sure many of you can relate and/or have a mental image and story of your own that connects to an experience, a ritual, or

just a fond memory. As I grew, I was able not only to retrieve the meaning of the words *chubby cheeks*, and spell them, but also to have a mental picture that represented the words. These kinds of interconnections are what make language learning richer.

For infants and toddlers, their first communications and the development of language is intimately tied to their connections with primary caregivers. “Whether children will eventually speak one, two languages, or more, their earliest lessons take place in the universal language of human interactions” (Lally, Mangione, and Greenwold as quoted in Figueroa, p. 11, 2006). Hart and Risley write that “children’s experiences with language cannot be separated from their experiences with interaction because parent-child talk is saturated with affect” (1995, p. 101).

Other factors, such as children’s family culture, economic status, and geographical location also contribute to children’s language learning and use.

### Active Learning Using All the Senses

The second key ingredient needed for infants’ and toddlers’ language development is *learning through doing*. When infants and toddlers come into contact with their world, it is through all of their senses! When we as caregivers provide a stimulating environment that engages children’s keen senses of smell, taste, sight, hearing, and touch, their learning levels increase — and this includes language learning. Play and language learning are inextricably linked — for, as young children actively explore their world and manipulate



Children’s family language and culture contribute in many ways to their language learning and use.

objects that engage all of their senses, they engage in new, meaningful, and memorable experiences. Further, as mentioned at the beginning of this article, when emotion is tied into experience, the experiences become embedded in memory. This brings us back to the point that infants and toddlers are sensory-motor learners. When infants and toddlers are actively involved through movement of their bodies and engagement of their senses, their brains are stimulated, resulting in a greater development of neural connections.

As we engage in play with children, we can extend this kind of learning through conversation or by giving children words (vocabulary) for what they are doing. During play, children are free to make choices, explore, and express themselves through language. Choice time, more than any other part of the daily routine, allows children time to practice conversation, experiment with language, and express themselves freely without any adult interference and/or expectations. So when infants and toddlers are engaged with their whole bodies and experience the world through their senses, their language learning becomes more meaningful and helps build lasting memories.

### Language in the Environment

The third key ingredient needed for language to thrive is a *vocabulary-rich environment* in which young children hear new words throughout the day, every day; where adults expose children to many words in many different contexts; and where conversations are a give-and-take process, with time for children to respond at their own pace. As caregivers, when we fluently use object, action, and idea words, we model language through labeling and give children words to attach to the experiences they are having. In a study of young children's language development, Hart and Risley state, "By the time the children were three years old, trends in amount of talking, vocabulary growth, and style of interaction were well established" (1995, pp. 176–177). So we are laying the foundation for children's language and literacy development well before they get into formal schooling. "Language provides the foundation for the development of literacy skills. Learning to communicate through gestures, sounds, and words increases a child's interest in — and later understanding of — books and reading (Lerner, C., and Ciervo, L. A., 2004). The more new words young children are exposed to within their daily experiences, the wider their vocabulary and understanding of how language works will be. But we do need to be careful and not "talk at" children with lots of vocabulary words that make no sense to them. The language we use to "narrate" their experiences should be descriptive and make sense to them, and our conversations should pertain to what they are doing and learning.

We encourage you to try out the various strategies discussed in this article, to aid infants and toddlers in their language acquisition. The most important points to keep in mind



with this age are that language is developed, not taught, and that it grows organically from meaningful interactions with attentive and responsive caregivers!

### References

- Apel, K., & Masterson, J. J. (2001). *Beyond baby talk*. Roseville, CA: Prima Publishing.
- Figueroa, A. (2006). *Connecticut's guidelines for the development of infant and toddler early learning*. Hartford, CT: Connecticut Department of Social Services.
- Golinkoff, R. M., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (1999). *How babies talk: The magic and mystery of language in the first three years of life*. New York, NY: Penguin Putnam.
- Gopnik, A., Meltzoff, A. N., & Kuhl, P. K. (1999). *The scientist in the crib: What early learning tells us about the mind*. New York, NY: Harper Collins.
- Hart, B. & Risley, T. R. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes.
- Hart, B., & Risley, T. (1999). *The social world of children learning to talk*. Baltimore, MD: Brookes Publishing.
- Lerner, C. & Ciervo, L. A. (2004). *Getting ready for school begins at birth: How to help your child learn in the early years (parent education booklet)*. Zero to Three: Washington, D.C.
- Nagy, W. E., & Scott, J. A. (2000). Vocabulary processes. In Kamil, Mosenthal, Pearson, & Barr (Eds.). *Handbook of Reading Research, Vol. III* (pp. 269–284). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- O'Grady, W. (2005). *How children learn language*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Post, J., Hohmann, M., & Epstein, A. S. (2011). *Tender care and early learning: Supporting infants and toddlers in childcare settings*. (2nd ed.). Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press.
- Weikart, D. P., Olmsted, P. P., & Montie, J. (with Hayes, N., & Ojala, M.). (2003). *A world of preschool experience: Observations in 15 countries*. Ypsilanti, MI: HighScope Press.

Shannon D. Lockhart, M.A. is a senior early childhood specialist with the HighScope Educational Research Foundation in Ypsilanti, MI. Shannon has served as a national and international researcher; curriculum developer for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers; trainer; teacher; and educational consultant in the United States and abroad.



[Click here for entire newsletter](#)