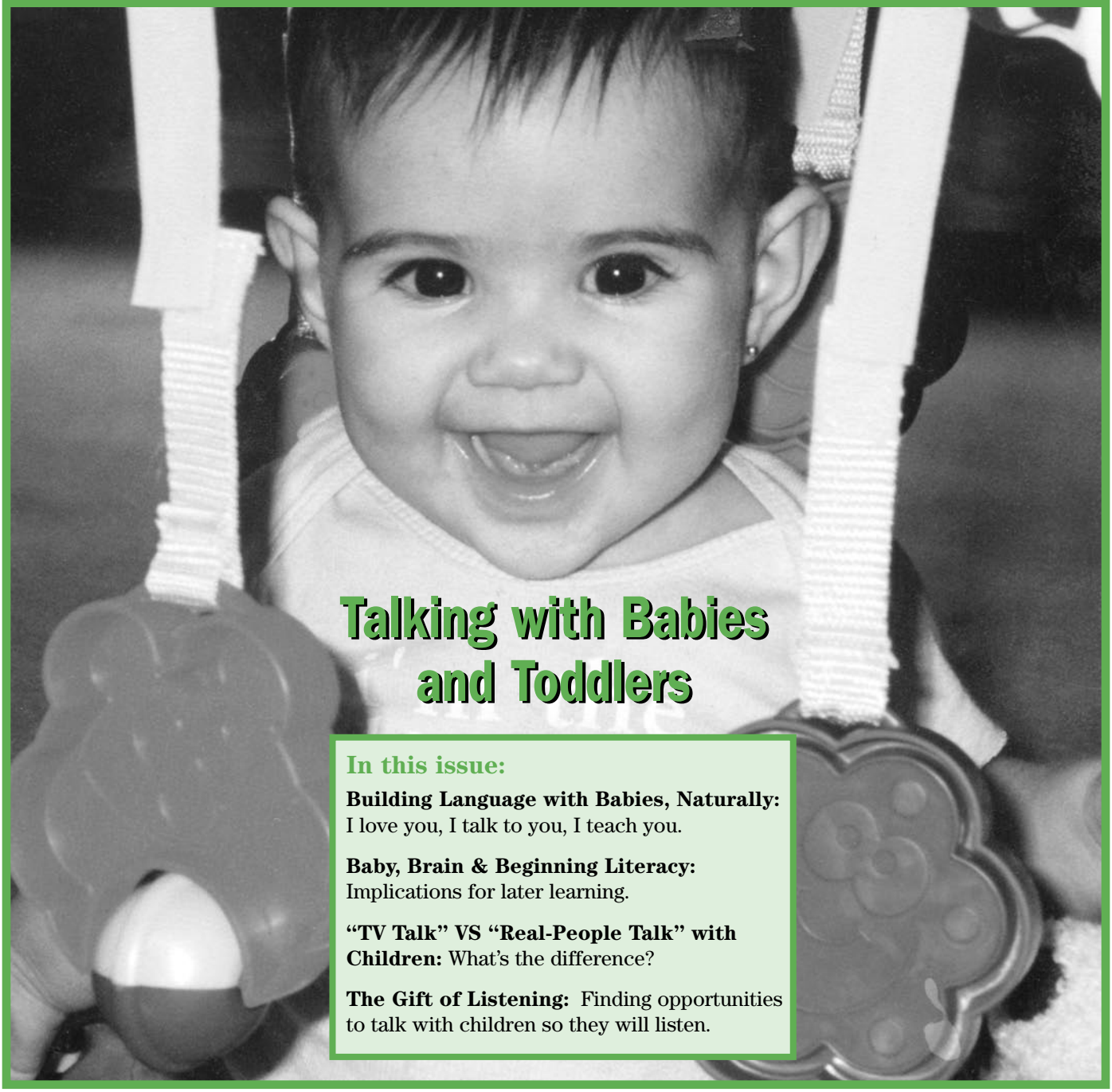
Family Development

Spring 2004 — Report to New Mexico from the UNM Family Development Program

Rich Language Environments Build Literacy Skills for School Success



Talking with Babies and Toddlers

In this issue:

Building Language with Babies, Naturally

by Judy Madewell, MA

In the not-too-distant past, we had a less scientifically validated understanding of what infants could do than we have today. Family members had an inkling, certainly, of the capabilities of newborns—"Look, she's smiling at me already,"—while the experts stood with folded arms smirking, "That child can't see yet, let alone interact…" Not so today. Now we have proof that Grandma was right.

Gopnick, Meltzoff and Kuhl (1999) (along with many others) have shown the enormous potential for early learning, beginning at birth. In their work, *The Scientist in the Crib*, they make the point that it is in everyone's best interest to take advantage of infants' readiness to learn culture and to communicate with their surroundings. Not only is learning language intrinsic to infants, human beings in general are predisposed toward *teaching* language to them. And besides being practical, helping babies learn to communicate is a lot of fun.

In a recent workshop participants watched a video with many cute images of babies and young children demonstrating language-related behaviors. As the audience viewed the video, there was a chorus of interaction with the babies. When the babies looked sad, a collective "oohhh" went up; when the babies dropped something, the people said things like "uh oh" or "oops." It was as though the soundtrack to the video were not needed, so expert were the members of the audience at interpreting and responding to the cues of the children.

Infants may have a socio-biological drive to learn language, and people associating with them have the drive to ensure that language is learned, but some advice from early childhood researchers could make the experience more well-thought-out, more fruitful, and ever more enjoyable.

The phenomenon of language, a capacity

The progression of the development of infant language roughly follows the pattern below (Fowler, 1990):

- Miscellaneous sounds: 0-1 month
- Vowels and consonants: 1-5 months
- Two-syllable repetitions: 6-7 months
- Babbled strings of syllables: 7-8 months
- First word recognition: 8-9 months
- Ma-ma, Da-da, other names: 9-10 months
- Imitates words: 10-11 months
- First real words—three or more: 11-12 months
- 10-20-word vocabulary: 18-20 months
- Two-word combinations: 20-22 months
- Three-word phrases or sentences: 22-24 months
- Talks in sentences: 24-27 months
- Relates experiences: 33-36 months
- Uses basic rules of grammar: 48 months

These language milestones are typical, but some variation will be seen among children, both in the order of development and in the age at which the skills emerge. (If a child is developing much more slowly than the projected scale above, it would be wise to have the child's hearing checked and language development evaluated by a professional.)

This baby expresses a very satisfied feeling to his father.

This mother and child are engaged in dialogue.

unique to humans, as far as we know, is based on human culture and social relations, according to Holzman (1997). *Because* we are humans, we are influenced by culture and social relations. We plan behaviors based on what we think we know about others and how we predict they will respond to what we do. This ability, called *secondary consciousness*, allows people to communicate with each other. Non-humans, on the other hand, may *signal* other animals through a cry of pain or a stance of aggression, but there is debate whether these signals can be termed *communicating*.

Holzman reflects on her own research in which she observed mothers with infants. In the early routines of feeding, diapering, bathing, etc., she observed that the repetitiveness of the routines was so similar, they were like dress rehearsals for a play. But as the mothers spoke to the babies, they could hear the babies' language growing daily.

Controversy

Some researchers have tried to "speed up" development of language (Fowler, 1990), while others (Elkind, 1996) are concerned with the consequences of "hurrying" a child. Another approach, sometimes referred to as "Emergent Curriculum," is based on the premise that children will respond to new concepts that interest them, and that when they do show interest in a topic area, it is appropriate to introduce new skills associated with that interest. Perhaps we should be less concerned with the *speed* of development of a skill than with the *readiness* for the skill and the satisfaction a child seems to experience in practicing a new skill. Enjoyment is requisite for optimal language development. The more fun it is to learn language, the more parents and children will *want* to engage in it.

The pleasure associated with language development can begin with such early interactions as the soft words spoken by a mother while nursing her baby. The earliest interchanges involve vocalizations and pauses, turn-taking, intensity of response, giving and receiving of language in familiar rhythms. When each coo, chuckle, hiccup, and exclamation made is given attention and respect for the child as a person, she learns the respect modeled by the parent. Later the child may show the same respect when she begins to talk.

Activities to help children build language

Although all children naturally develop differently, below are some activities you can do with children that will help to build language:

- 0-3 months: Stare into your baby's eyes (for as long as it's mutually enjoyable). You're on the first level of getting to know one another, and you're building a foundation of love and trust that will serve future interactions. Speak to him in a soft, conversational voice. He will learn the rhythms of his language. Sing to him, dance with him, rock him.

- 3-6 months: Talk to your baby about what you are doing, as you're doing it. Talk about emotions—yours and hers. Research shows that talking to babies helps build language and cognitive abilities. You might try singing to her about the things you are doing. Also, it is never too early to start reading to your baby. Making books a part of a very young child's life can lay a foundation for lifelong enjoyment of reading. Just be sure that the books given to infants have strong pages and can tolerate being chewed.

- 6-12 months: Play predictable games with pauses like "Peek-a-boo" and "This Little Piggy." Babies learn about what happens next. Vary the length of pause and add a slightly different surprise ending to keep things interesting. Baby may begin imitating some of your sounds and movements. Acknowledge what he has said or done, and add a little more. Show lots of enthusiasm, and baby will too.

(Continued on next page.)

Caregivers give and receive cues from babies.

• 12-18 months: Baby may call a few objects by name. Read plenty of books and name the objects. Add sound effects. Sometimes babies may say "doggy" and sometimes they may say "woof-woof." Keep a list of baby's emerging words, or make a recording of them. You may realize (as perhaps you have since baby's birth) that you are using 'baby talk' or 'parent-ese,' where you pronounce words oddly and raise your voice to a squeaky octave above your usual. This is perfectly normal; in fact people world-wide speak in this way.

• 18-24 months: Child imitates environmental sounds. He may speak in two-word-sentences. Make it a point to *pay attention* to what your child is saying, and respond appropriately. He may talk about people he recognizes in photographs. Sing songs or chants together like, "The Itsy Bitsy Spider" and *"Sana, Sana Colita de Rana"*. Let the child choose which book to read. You may notice that he has favorites that he likes to hear over and over again. Repetition helps children learn.

• 24-36 months: Children's favorite words may include "no" and "mine." They may seem very selfish during this year, and that is what *should* be happening. They are beginning to understand that they are people separate from you. Letting them choose books or activities and allowing them to direct conversations helps them develop independence to take care of things for themselves. Many children in this age range like to know big words like the names of dinosaurs. They may like to work alongside you doing real grown-up tasks. Seize these opportunities to have conversations. You can help your child just by being there, but also in developing vocabulary and learning grammar. If you ask your child questions and answer the questions they ask you, you are helping to develop critical thinking skills.

At any age: use lots of rhyming songs and poems and books. Play with the sounds of words. Tell family stories. Talk about what happened today. Sing together. Read the Sunday funnies … and the list goes on. If a game is too advanced, a child will let you know by pulling back from an activity. That's okay. Try again another day. (Adapted from *The Brain Game*, © 2000, La Crosse Kids Committee, La Crosse, WI)

Parents' predisposition is to favor their children above others and to protect and nurture them to survive and thrive in their environment. In lay terms, that disposition could be called 'love'. Love is reciprocal and grows right along with the child. The mutually rewarding aspects of communicating with children predict that communication will happen more and more. If a good foundation of communication is built during the child's earliest years, it may create a pattern that can serve through the elementary years, the teen years, and beyond. ♥

References

Gopnik, A., Meltzoff, A. N., and Kuhl, P. 1999. *The Scientist in the Crib.* William Morrow and Co.: New York.

Holzman, M. 1997. *The Language of Children: Evolution and Development of Consciousness and Language, Second Edition.* Blackwell Publishers: Cambridge, MA.

La Crosse Kids Committee. 2000. *The Brain Game: Fun Ways to Help Your Baby's Mind Grow.* Rotary Club of La Crosse: La Crosse, WI.

Baby, Brain, & Beginning Literacy Implications for Later Learning

by Paula Steele

You are a new parent. Or you work in a childcare center and take care of infants. You hold a baby and are mesmerized by everything about it from its teeny, tiny perfectly formed toes to its sweet smelling round and delicate head. You gaze in wonder upon the eyes that dart from side to side and the mouth that puckers and burbles. There's so much happening in that small world you hold in your arms. There is the hope and the promise of this child's future in a world of stories. The stories she will hear and the stories she will tell. There are the stories she will read and the ones she will write.

When does the process of literacy begin? Now. Now is the time. From day one, from the start. Babies' brains have already been hard at work forming cells and making connections between those cells. A baby's involvement with language actually began before it was even born. Babies come into this world already knowing a lot about language.

How is this possible? Imagine the baby nestled snugly inside mama. Through vibrations the baby is hearing mother's voice after five months of gestation. Baby is becoming attuned to her rhythm and melody. The rises and falls of language are becoming encoded in baby's brain. The brain is becoming organized and making connections. It does this naturally, as part of the process of development, but it also responds to information received.

So, doesn't it make sense that when baby is born, the learning continues? And of course, it does. Learning is happening at a ferocious pace. Baby's brain develops rapidly in the first year of life. In utero, the brain only develops to about 15% of its capacity. By the end of the first year of life, it has developed another 50%!

What is happening? We are born with pretty much all the brain cells we will ever need. Each cell, or neuron, has appendages, called axons, that branch out. These axons form the bridges that leap across the spaces, or synapses between cells when electrical signals are generated. Each time a signal is generated, the pathway is reinforced and eventually may become permanent, which allows for quick and accurate transmission of information.

Think of it in terms of creating a trail through a field. If you make a path one or two times, you leave a faint trail. If it's not used again, the path will disappear or be difficult to find. But if you continue to follow that trail, you'll leave a permanent imprint that will be easy to find and quick to cross.

We, as parents, caregivers, and teachers help to stimulate electrical signals through our interactions with baby. The sensory experiences that we provide help to strengthen and define permanent pathways.

What does this mean for baby's development? It means that we want to provide repeated, positive experiences to promote healthy, strong connections that will lay the foundation for later learning. We want to provide a safe, nurturing, and stimulating environment. It means that baby should have caregivers who interact in the active and engaging manner that is essential for cognitive, language, social, and emotional development.

What does this look like? For starters, it looks like the use of shorter sentences, repetition, and speaking in a melodious way, with your face about a foot away from baby's face. The voice rises and becomes almost singsong, while the sounds of the language are clearly articulated. This is called 'parentese' or 'motherese'. Most parents, caregivers, and even children will speak in this way naturally when talking to a baby. With your face close to his, baby is watching how to form and move the tongue and lips to be able to reproduce those sounds. That's where cooing and babbling come in. Baby is practicing speech, playing with the mouth and sound production. Baby is experimenting! (Gopnik, A., Meltzoff, A., Kuhl,

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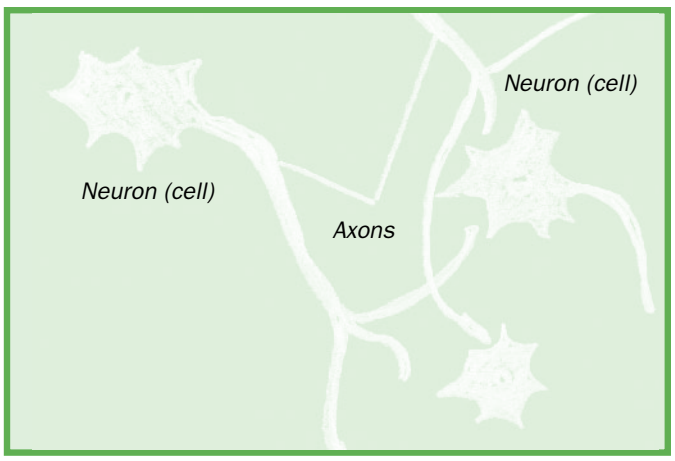


Making eye contact with babies stimulates brain activity.

P. 1999. *Scientist in the Crib*) Talk to babies a lot. Treat them as if they were conversationalists. Even if they are not yet talking, they are learning the fundamentals of conversations—taking turns, making eye contact, and using facial expressions (Genishi, Celia. Young Children's Oral Language Development. www.comeunity.com).

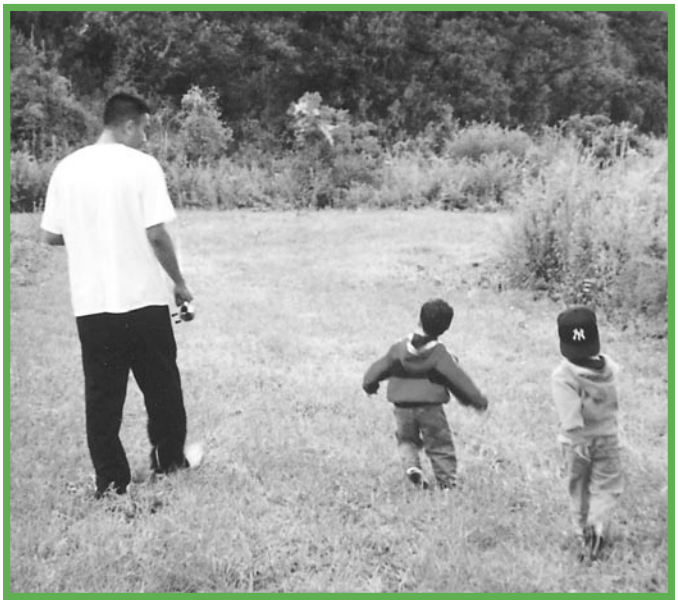
Talk to your baby about daily events; describe what you're doing as you do it. Use specific language. Be encouraging and positive. Use fewer commands and find ways to speak that give your child options instead of prohibitions. These suggestions come from a book called *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young American Children* by Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley. They engaged in an extensive study of language interaction between parents and children in three different strata of society: families on welfare, working class families, and families working at a professional level.

While all families have similar everyday experiences, Hart and Risley found that the extent of the language experience varied greatly, as shown in the following table:

	Words heard per hour	Words heard by age 4
Welfare	616	10,000,000
Working Class	1,251	20,000,000
Professional Class	2,153	50,000,000

Language flourishes in a language rich-environment. The richer the environment, the greater chance a child has for academic, economic, and social success. Let's make a pact—parents, teachers, and caregivers—let us enrich the language of the children with whom we interact. Let us not be afraid to speak with them, nor to direct their attention with stimulating words, words that pique their interest; let us be encouraging and model the richness of language that all children need, but not all receive.

There are many other ways to help baby's brain develop. Remember, we want lots of good, rich experiences in repeated measures, to help lay the groundwork for the neural connections that are being created in the brain during that first year of life. So, read to your baby! Yes, baby loves to hear your voice, even if she seems too young to comprehend what you're reading. She'll feel the rhythm of your breath and the rise and fall of your intonations. Likewise, sing to your baby. She doesn't care if you're out of tune. She just wants to hear your voice. Sing your favorite songs. Make up the words if you can't remember all the lyrics. Read silly or serious poetry. Play finger games and count her little 'piggies'. These are important interactions that help children learn the sounds of language.



Create strong, healthy paths in the brain by engaging in rich, healthy experiences with children.

Later on, play games like "I see something red…" Listen to his first words and expand on what he says. Engage in imaginative play from time to time. You'll want to have lots of books and writing materials available. Your baby will develop—learn to grasp, crawl, and imitate—and as a toddler he'll want to 'read' and 'write' too. Have both soft and board books available. Magazines that you've read can keep a toddler happy and busy with the important work of looking at pictures, turning pages, and, yes —crunching and ripping.

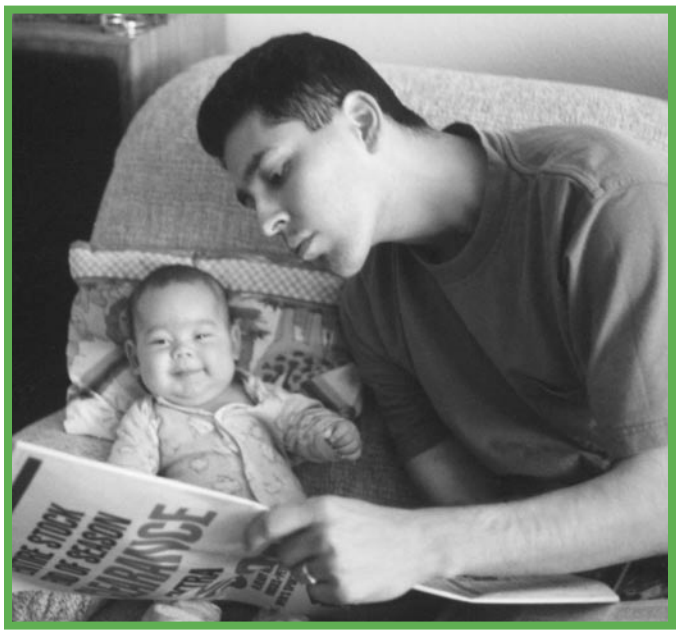
As you look at a book with your baby or toddler, you will help her learn the basics of reading just by reading to her. Point out that the print goes from left to right, and from the top to the bottom. Show her how to turn the pages. You'll help her understand that those black marks on the page mean something. And all of this learning will be reinforced in a positive way because reading with someone feels so good. Your baby will have access to information and imagination in a safe and nurturing environment.

Children begin to scribble at around eighteen months of age, give or take a few months. It's a magical and powerful event when they see that they have created something that did not exist before. Next thing you know, they are scribbling lines and maybe a few letters and reading to you! They are creating their own realities of what it means to read and to write. They will use what they know to practice and approximate the roles and experiences that they will eventually grow into (McLane, Joan B, and McNamee, Gillian D. *Zero to Three Journal*, September, 1991).

Drawing of early writing

What does this have to do with learning how to read and write later? All of these experiences with books, songs, and rhyming games form the building blocks for language, and for reading and writing development. The more exposure children have to rich language experience, to the sounds, enjoyment and pleasures of books, songs, and games, the stronger will be the foundation for a structured reading and writing program when they enter school. It's important to realize and to remember that literacy is a continuous developmental process that begins from the first moments.

> "…we can see the connection (and meaning) between an infant mouthing a book, the book handling behavior of a two year old and the page-turning of a five year old. We can see that the first three years of exploring and playing with books, singing nursery rhymes, listening to stories, recognizing words, and scribbling are truly the building blocks for language and literacy development (*www.zerotothree.org*)."



This baby is happy reading with dad.

Now, this does not guarantee immediate success. Sometimes there are still problems to overcome. Or maybe the child simply needs a little more time. That's just the nature of the individual. It's important to continue to enjoy each other's company, to continue reading together, and to encourage writing. With this background and explicit instruction, reading and the enjoyment of reading, will follow.

Here is the call to you—mother, father, caregiver, whoever you are and wherever you interact with infants and toddlers. The development of early literacy does not happen as a matter of course. It is dependent upon the experiences that are available to the baby, to the toddler, in the environments in which it develops—whether that is at home or in the childcare center. Talk to the children and allow them to respond. Their literacy development is dependent upon their total experience of interactive communication in all forms: speaking, hearing, reading, and writing. It is you who make the prospect of reading and writing interesting to your young ones. When they see you reading and writing in meaningful ways, and when you share these interactions with them, they develop an appreciation for and a desire to participate in these same activities on their own.

Provide not only the books, paper, and writing materials, but also the spark of excitement that will draw our little ones in and set them alight with the joy of their own capabilities. ♥

"TV Talk" Vs "Real-People Talk" with Children: What's The Difference?

by Mary Dudley, Ph.D.

Everyone who's ever had responsibility for the daily care of young children has probably turned on the television or plugged in a video for them to watch. Sometimes, we turn on the television or a video to free up time to do a chore or just to have some time off from interacting with children. Besides all the other concerns you may have related to TV and videos and their place in young children's lives, you might want to think about their relationship to learning to talk.

We know that children can watch experiences they might never see in ordinary life and learn new words from television and videos. Some television programming has been deliberately designed, in fact, to promote vocabulary development in children whose home life might not offer rich language experiences. What's more, there are fine shows for children that present wonderful stories so that more children can hear the rich language of literature that was written just for them.

"Look! Christopher! What is that? What is it? What do you think it is? Is it a frog? Yes, it is a frog! ***People make adjustments in their language when speaking to children.***

So is there any difference between television or video language that is aimed at young children and the language they hear in real life from real people? Of course, there is! Just think about it: what is missing from a child's experience watching and listening to television talk compared to having an interaction with another person or other people? Obviously, ***it's the other person, the other people!***

The adjustments people make in their language when speaking to children are well-documented: we shorten our sentences, change the pitch of our voice, repeat ourselves. These adjustments can be made in television speech, too. But what's missing is the constant fine tuning people typically make when talking to the child in front of or next to them. If they're sensitive to the cues that little children make when they're losing interest, people will constantly adjust their speech to re-capture the child's attention. Contrast the following hypothetical adult speech about a frog in the garden with a TVshow:

"Look! Christopher! What is that? What is that? What do you think it is? Is it a frog? Is it? Is it a frog? Yes! Yes! It ***is*** a **frog**! **It is a frog!"**

Typical TV conversational speech in a documentary about a frog, even in television programming for children, is less likely to make the same accommodations to the young child's limited comprehension.

Of course, the documentary is missing something else that is critical in young children's learning: a real, live frog for the child to see up close and possibly touch, to hold in her own hand. When children can hold something that's new to them, when they can touch it and bring other senses to bear on learning about it—not just look at it via a photograph or TV image—the new concept is more deeply rooted in their understanding. TV images may skim along the surface of the child's awareness, but hands-on experience that is accompanied by closely-matched language roots the experience deep in the child's knowledge.

So while television documentaries may bring natural wonders into children's living rooms, the experience may be ultimately less important to their intellectual and linguistic development than simply squatting in the backyard, looking closely at a frog (or a bug or a tomato!).

Animated children's stories abound on children's television and they can build vocabulary while they promote familiarity with story structure. Children learn about a story's beginning, middle and end, and the logical sequence of events while they also learn that stories are enjoyable and fun. Thus, they may be more motivated to learn to read themselves—so they can enjoy a favorite story whenever they please, without having to wait for someone to read to them.

Televised versions of children's stories are fun but, as with the example of the frog, many children will benefit more from a story read to them on their living room couch or at their preschool's story circle. There the reader can note the young child's loss of interest or his confusion and can make adjustments to regain his attention while the television story will just go along, with or without him.

A teacher or family member can let the child guide the way, turning pages at his own speed while the adult simply says a word or two about the illustration, if that fits the listener better than the whole story. Or, again, the reader might try to spark the child's interest, luring him into the story with questions like, "Look, Tony! What is that monkey doing? What does he have? Is that a telephone like ours?" What's more when the story's being read in person, the child can get immediate answers to his questions and the reader can pose the sort of questions that have been found to help children later learn to read, questions such as, "Why do you think (the character) did that?" or "How do you think he feels now?"

It's not our intent to argue that children should never watch television. We do want to point out, however, that almost any benefit TV offers can be enhanced when children watch it accompanied by adults who are paying attention, too. Writing specifically about ***Sesame Street*** with its terrific array of fun, interactive ways to engage young children in learning, the authors of the National Research Council's ***Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children***, [Snow et al, 2002] point out that even the best in children's programming will be better if adults watch along with the children: "Parents and day care teachers who play along with the activities and highlight the productive practices make the most of the good programs for the children's benefit."
[p. 311]

In conclusion, then, TV and videos for children—even when they're of the highest quality—won't match the value of a caregiver/teacher who's really tuned in—someone who likes young children, pays attention, and responds to children with affection and enthusiasm. ♥

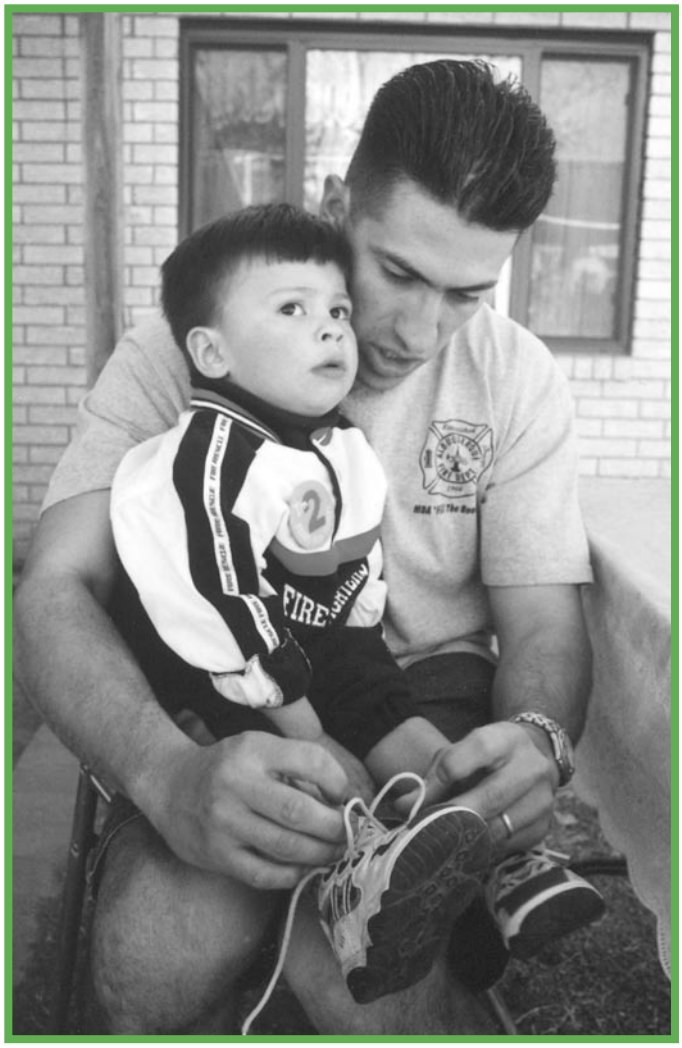
Turn off the TV and watch how your baby enjoys your undivided attention and enthusiasm.

The Gift of Listening

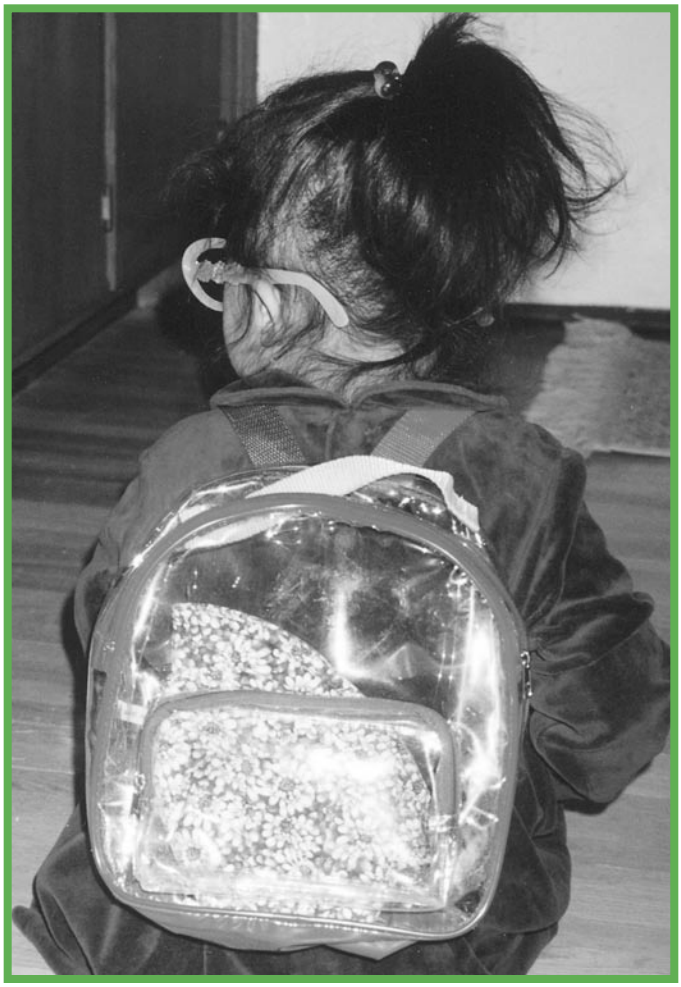
by Jo Ann Gonzales

In good communication, listening is one of the most valued gifts we can offer as we nurture oral language skills in infants and young children. Good communication involves listening—listening with the intent to process, interpret, and respond to verbal messages and other cues without passing judgment. It means that the listener genuinely hears the speaker. Taking the time to listen, giving your full attention with eye contact, lets the speaker know you really care about what she has to say. As facilitators of learning, whether it be in the role of parent, caregiver or teacher, we have the ability to offer that gift in everyday situations as we interact with children.

Teachers and other professionals have a variety of activities to perform during the course of their day.



This child's expression indicates that dad is talking "at" not "with" him.



Be proactive. Avoid morning arguments. You and your child can get her backpack ready for school the night before.

They may be required to do playground duty, cafeteria duty, prepare for and attend meetings, and much more. Opportunities may present themselves to offer the gift of listening during these times. However, it may not be the most opportune time to listen. At the playground, for example a child may want your undivided attention NOW! He may want you to listen intently and respond right at that moment. A preoccupied teacher concerned with the safety of all the children could easily respond, "Go play." A skilled listener, on the other hand, could assess the situation and respond to that child's immediate needs. Perhaps she might say "I know what you have to say is important and I want to hear it, but there's so much happening that I can't give you my full attention right now. Let's talk about it after recess." It's easy to understand how so many demands for your attention can make it hard to listen to the children we care about.

As parents are trying get out of the house in the morning rush, feeding the kids, making the beds and answering the phone, they can forget to talk with children and talk at them instead. Parents can easily find themselves barking orders like, “Hurry up!” “Get dressed!” or “Don’t forget your homework!” With today’s busy schedules and time constraints (not to mention the many different roles families play) a climate of commanding children replaces listening to them.

You could be proactive. Here are some ideas.

- Make a checklist of duties with children that have to be completed before leaving.
- Use a timer or clock instead of nagging.
- Organize the night before by selecting clothes for the following day.
- Check backpacks for homework and notices for school.

Good communication between adults and children must create an atmosphere that encourages conversations and builds relationships. It provokes thought and promotes problem-solving skills in children. When adults recognize that children are people and deserve the same respectful listening that we offer other adults, good communication is more likely to occur.

Many developmental psychologists believe that relationships are the foundation for language and communication in young children. Teachers may discover that an inroad to real learning evolves simply through offering the gift of listening and paying attention to students. When they talk with students and encourage students to talk with each other, a partnership in learning and a higher quality of thinking happens. (Stewart, *The Reading Teacher*, v. 2003). ♥

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At a big meeting, world leaders decided to stop fighting wars. Why? Let's ask them….

After José was struck by lightning, everything he imagined started to come true….

Headline: America elects a 12-year old President! The first thing she did was…..

True Stories

Here is a scar on my body, and this is the story of how I got it….

One dark night I had a very weird dream….

I want to tell you about someone I know who has a lot of courage….

On the talk show today they're interviewing me, about one thing I know a lot about….

Here is a late-breaking news report about a great thing that I once did…

¿Qué hay en la tele?

Hay muchas noticias de interés que nunca verá en la televisión. ¿Qué podía ser unas?

Instrucciones: Remueva el papel de cuadrada.

Mantenga fija esta tarjeta al frente de sus ojos para que pueda ver la audiencia a través de la apertura. Debajo encontrará las primeras lineas de unas historias. Escoja una y termínela.

¡Qué disfrute contando cuentos!

Cuentos ficcionales

¡Ojo! Un nave espacial extraterrestre acababa de aterrizar en su jardín. Vaya para una entrevista…

La semana pasada todos los televisores desaparecieron. De repente…

Hubo una gran reunión. Los líderes del mundo decidieron cesar todas las guerras. ¿Por qué? Preguntémosles…

Después de que José fue golpeado por un relámpago, todo que él había imaginado empezó a ocurrir…

Títular: Los Estados Unidos ha elegido como Presidente una niña de 12 años. Lo primero que ella hizo fue...

Cuentos Verdaderos

Aquí hay una cicatriz; este es el cuento de cómo lo recibí…

En una noche oscura tuve un sueño muy extraño…

Quiero contarle de alguien que conozco que tiene mucho valor...

Voy a contarles de algo extraordinario que una vez yo hice…

Quiero contarles todo lo que yo sé acerca de…