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## Language Learning at Home: Tips & Activity Ideas from Birth to Age 6

"Good morning. It is a lovely day today. Should we take a walk in the park? Let's get our mittens and jackets. It's crisp and cold this morning."

You might chatter with a four-year-old this way. What about a four-month-old? It might not even occur to parents to communicate like this with an infant. Yet, almost everyone has seen babies respond to their parent's words -- usually with their whole bodies! Babies communicate with facial expressions, body movements, eye contact, crying, babbling, cooing...

Maria Montessori noticed "...how closely the baby watches the lips of a person speaking; he looks at them most intently and tries to imitate the movements." The next time you have a chance to speak to a baby, watch how the baby's eyes focus on your mouth!

### Talk (Not Baby Talk): Ideas for Children Birth to 3 Years

In the last months of pregnancy, even an unborn baby will respond to the murmur of your voice. The more you "converse" with babies, the more they understand. They need the give-and-take of human interaction to learn. You speak and the baby coos. The baby gurgles and you respond. Television and computers are no substitute -- there are no eyes to engage, no moving lips to watch, no response when baby communicates.

Talk to your children -- talk to them a lot! Talk to them all day about everything you do together, using descriptive words and even asking questions. Before you know it, one day, a flood of words streams forth. They're talking. And talking. And talking...

- Changing diapers? "Here is a nice dry diaper for you. Isn't that better?"
- Bathing? "Where is your foot? I see toes! Let's count them."
- Dressing? "This jacket will keep you warm and snug today. I see your red mittens in the pocket."
- Napping? "Doesn't the blanket feel soft? I'll sing you a lullaby to help you fall asleep."

Dr. Montessori observed that young children are able to absorb great amounts of information simply by living in their environment. When it comes to learning language, parents are the link between the child and the environment.

Stimulate your baby's ability to communicate by responding to coos and gurgles with whole sentences and grown-up words. Describe what an infant experiences and offer a word for absolutely everything the young child sees in his world.

The baby gazes at a flower. "Isn't that a pretty flower?" Baby looks at you and wiggles his arms and legs.

You hold his gaze and respond, "It's so nice to see a bright yellow flower." Communication!

Before long, you'll become adept at vocabulary-building conversation with children. And, a language-rich environment beginning at birth is the best preparation for reading you can give a child.

### **The Sensitive Period for Language: Tips for Ages 3 to 6**

Along with expressing their own thoughts, growing children need a wider vocabulary in order to understand the thoughts of others. There is no better time for young children to learn words than from the ages of three to six. Montessori called this the sensitive period for language. She described it as a window of opportunity, during which the child is drawn to a particular activity or experience and finds it especially easy.

Children this age are word sponges. Notice how hard they listen and how eager they are to try big words like *architecture* or *asparagus*. When you give them a rich language environment at *just the right time*, children's communication skills will thrive.

Learning language is so easy for children during this sensitive period that they can even learn two languages at once. This works best if parents choose a language and use it consistently; for example, mom speaks Mandarin and dad speaks English. Associating one language with one parent at first helps the child discriminate between languages and know which language is being spoken.

**Sing Songs:** This is a great way to introduce language and to communicate with your children. Whatever your singing ability, children love to hear you sing! Start with classics like "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" and "The Itsy Bitsy Spider." You can use different words to fit these basic tunes or any song you know, or make up your own melodies and lyrics.

Making up words to suit the occasion is a great way to introduce or reinforce language about the child's experience: "We're putting on your little yellow sock, little yellow sock, little yellow sock... Now we're putting on your big green hat to protect you from the sun!" Hint: sing softly to capture a young child's undivided attention!

**Read, read, read:** Do you remember how much you loved it when a grown-up read to you as a child? Read poems and nursery rhymes, stories and counting books, folk tales and fact books, newspapers and picture books. Exposure to a broad range of styles gives children more opportunities to absorb the beauty and structure of language.

Find a reading routine that works for you and stick with it. It could be a book at bedtime, early morning or

whatever fits your schedule.

Even better, don't limit yourself to reading books! Written language is everywhere. Grocery shopping? Read a few labels in line. Doctor's office? Read the signs on the walls. Dinner out? Read the menu items.

No matter how small, take every opportunity to draw the young child's attention to written language and new words.

**Use big words:** Children are not only capable of using "big" words, they delight in learning complicated words and phrases that name the things they see around them. From *arugula* in the produce aisle, to *Corinthian columns* on a walk, to a classmate's *fractured clavicle*, don't hold back!

Children don't always get the words quite right. Sometimes it's hard not to giggle at their adorable misconstructions. Rather than correct them on the spot, find extra opportunities to pronounce the word slowly.

**Name what children see:** And what they taste, smell, hear, and feel -- while they are experiencing it. When your child's lips pucker after he tastes a lemon, give him words: "Lemons taste very sour, don't they?" When your child squishes mud between her toes, "Mud is so slippery and soft." Follow up with an open-ended question rather than a "yes or no" question: "How do your toes like that squishy feeling?" rather than "Is it squishy?".

## Vocabulary for At-Home Language Activities

The word lists below are designed to help parents see how to integrate language learning into everyday life with a young child. Keep these few tips in mind to help you help your child absorb the structure of language, as well as the words.

- Speak clearly.
- Use a natural tone of voice and normal inflections.
- Use exact words consistently (decide whether it is a *cup* or a *mug*, a *sofa* or a *couch*).
- Use complete sentences.

### While preparing a meal, name the:

Utensils: spatula, whisk, food processor, tongs, paring knife...

Foods: broccoli, hummus, bok choy, risotto, spaetzle, avocado...

Actions: scrub, chop, slice, sauté, boil, drain, rinse, stir...

### **While getting ready for work, name the:**

Clothing: overalls, alpaca sweater, silk blouse, trousers, loafers...

Colors and patterns: blue hat, red socks, striped shorts, plaid skirt...

Things you use: dressing table, hamper, ironing board, mirror...

### **While in the yard, name the:**

Plants: petunia, rhododendron, bearded iris, echinacea, succulents...

Parts of plants: root, stem, trunk, branch, foliage, stamen...

Garden tools and features: spade, hoe, trowel, trellis, compost pile...

Actions: dig, rake, aerate, fertilize, prune, harvest, mulch...

### **While in the bath, name the:**

Things you use: bathtub, sink, soap, washcloth, towel...

Parts of the body: nose, cheeks, feet, scapula, clavicle...

Sensory adjectives: slippery soap, warm water, smooth bathtub, soft washcloth...

## **Word Games for Trains, Planes, and Automobiles**

While traveling on vacation (and even while driving around town), name what you see: *bus stop, airport, taxi stand, ticket counter, tollbooth, church, city hall, traffic light, yield sign...*

For longer trips, bring plenty of books, and word-based games or vocabulary cards, if you have them. When suitcase space is tight, many simple word-based games require nothing more than time and imagination. You might be amazed at how quickly time flies while you are enjoying a quick game of 20 questions with your children.

**20 questions:** Think of an object. The other players ask yes or no questions (Is it bigger than a car? Does it have antennae?) in order to deduce what "it" is. Young children love guessing. Why stop at twenty questions?

**I Spy:** "I spy with my little eye something yellow." Or shaped like a triangle. Or made of metal. Make it a sound game! "...Something that starts with buh" (letter B). Saying the sound (not the letter name) helps children realize that words are made by putting together sounds.

**Play with voices:** Take turns speaking or singing in a *loud* voice, a *whispering* voice, a *deep* voice, an *opera star* voice... Just ask -- children will have lots of descriptive suggestions.

**Counting:** Count the number of people you see who are wearing blue, wearing a hat, or walking a dog...

Count the number of blocks you've traveled. Count the number of buttons on your shirt. How many spoons on the table? Something to touch makes counting easier for the youngest children.

### **The Last Word...**

A rich oral language environment brings you closer together as a family now and gives your child a strong foundation for reading and writing later on. Communicating, naming the world, reading, and playing word games with young children during the sensitive period for language is as easy as it is fun. Later on when your child lands a spot on the debate team or uses words to comfort a friend in need, you'll know it was time well spent!

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