

Learning to Speak

Professor Matt Sanders

During the first twelve months, most infants will acquire a slender vocabulary of about ten words. However, in the next two years, that vocabulary will rapidly grow to around 800 or 900. By the age of three a toddler will be able to understand most adults' sentences.

In fact, toddlers are so good at learning how to speak, they have no trouble learning two languages at the same time and are capable of knowing which language goes with which adult.

This tremendous surge in language is closely related to a child's general intellectual development and understanding of the world around them but is also influenced by interactions with their parents and other family members.

Parents play an important role in their child's language development. If you're worried that your child's language development seems to be much slower than children of the same age, seek professional help.

Encouraging your child to develop their language use and vocabulary will help them gain self-confidence and increase their chances of getting on with other children in a friendly and productive way.

So how can you help?

Firstly be accessible, listen to what your child is trying to say and look for opportunities to encourage them to say more. For example, if your child shows you one of their toys, instead of simply saying "That's a truck", you might invite them to tell you more about the toy, such as "That's a great truck, Tom. What sort of truck is it?"

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This natural teaching process is called incidental teaching.

Remember, it's not uncommon for two- and three-year-olds to stammer and struggle while getting their words out, but don't be tempted to interrupt and finish their sentences.

A child's interest in speaking is also driven by being spoken to. Point out and name things your child looks at through the day. If they find something particularly interesting, get close to them, bend down to their eye level and tell your child the name of the object they're looking at.

Correct mispronounced words; but in a positive way. Repeat the word and encourage them to try again. If your child attempts the word, praise them. If not, try again another time.

And make sure you're a good language role model. This is where baby talk is no longer helpful and proper pronunciation and correct sentences need to replace it. Avoid using very long sentences with many words, but don't be afraid to introduce new words to increase your child's vocabulary.

Take the time to describe the things you're doing such as gardening, cooking, taking care of the baby, as this may stimulate their interest and prompt them to talk further and ask questions.

Similarly, sharing your day's feelings and experiences involves your child with the exciting world of words. Tell them something that made you laugh, the people you spoke to, something you saw on the way home from work.

Finally, toddlers love to have stories read to them and to look through picture books with an interested adult. Both infants and toddlers should be read to from an early age at least once a day. Make sure you have a good supply of books. Libraries are always accessible. However, remember not to force your child to listen to a story if they're not interested; rather choose another time or topic.

Find more parenting tips at: manitoba.ca/triplep or call 945-4777 in Winnipeg or toll-free 1-877-945-4777.

Professor Matt Sanders is founder of the Triple P - Positive Parenting Program.