

A Language Rich Environment

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Most parents clearly delight in hearing their baby say his/her first words. However, few parents continue to consciously work at language development beyond those early words. Often it's not until there's a concern about the baby's development that parents begin to seek out ways to improve communication development.

It's widely accepted that strong verbal language forms the foundation for literacy development and overall academic success. Why not *enhance* those skills in the early years when the brain is in prime time for learning language? With some basic guidelines in mind, language learning can be maximized during everyday experiences. It's not necessary to buy special toys, equipment or computer programs. The best conversations come out of thin air following a child's focus of attention. Memorable talks have come from specks of dust in the sunlight, an ant carrying a crumb, and a spontaneous staring contest with the dog. The fact is, the actual topic doesn't really matter at all. A conversation is about two or more people jointly focused on a topic and sharing information or opinions. Believe it or not, these conversations begin by social exchanges with babies long before actual words develop.

The linguistic environment impacts a baby's rate of progress (for better or worse). Rich language models may include saying the same idea in a few ways using different words, expanding ideas and using new words to stretch a child's vocabulary. Strong language models are at and slightly above the child's level and it steadily becomes more complex as the child develops. This way the child is continuously exposed to new words and grammatical structures. Language development is typically slower in environments with less conversational exchanges. When there are more opportunities for verbal exchanges and listening to books there is more exposure to the structure of language and a richer vocabulary.

A language rich environment involves genuine explanations where each partner has an equal number of turns. It's not flashcards or a gazillion testy questions aimed at assessing what a child knows. Often by tuning into your child's interest of the moment you can strike up a valuable conversation. Watch carefully what your child is doing and then make some natural comments. For a baby just playful babble turns can help them hold up their end of the "conversation". An older preschool child is more likely to start chatting if you

comment about what you think or feel at the moment than if you begin asking a bunch of direct questions. Using words like “I wonder if...”, “Look at this, it’s very interesting” with lots of pause time can get the ball rolling. For the young school aged child it helps to add lots of imaginative twists and storytelling. For example, “I think that fly must be pretty tired, I wonder what he’s going to tell his family about his day when he gets home?”

It’s clear that just a lot of talking doesn’t make a rich language environment or learning experience. Talking too much may shut down a child’s interest. Conversational competency requires a balance of talking, listening and pause time.

There are MANY variables that determine a child’s language learning pace. Some children appear to develop strong skills quite naturally while others require significant support and practice to reach basic skill levels. Creating a linguistic environment that encourages frequent practice with conversation is a great place to begin. So whether you are Babbling with Babies™ or Chatting with Children™ let’s talk!