

Looking for some direction for your quality time with baby?

Guest post by Pamela Talbot M.Ed, CCC-SLP, Cert. AVT, C.E.D
Speech-Language Pathologist
and co-founder of Language Launchers Inc.

At the intersection of playful babble exchanges, shared book experiences, and singing yourself silly you will find a great destination. It's called language competency. Try to imagine a solid foundation of conversational and linguistic competence as the launch pad for literacy development, academic success, and social skills. Let's pack that little bag of tricks for early language learning and get going.

First, think of all your interactions as little conversational exchanges. Did you know that conversation skills begin with a simple eye gaze? True, babies begin their social development very early in life before words begin. That early social smile marks an important step on the journey to language development. The next time you "goo and ga" or play a game of "peek-a-boo" with your baby, think about it as a conversation. There is turn taking when you share roles as the listener or the speaker. The silly sound exchanges work to focus attention similar to maintaining a topic in a more advanced conversation. Eventually babies learn to initiate a playful exchange or call to get your attention and the number of conversational turns increase as attention span grows. Pay attention the number of talk turns you take or the pause time you leave as you engage in play with your baby. Are you holding a place for your baby to take his or her turn when s/he is ready? Even after a toddler begins to actually talk during the interaction try to slow the talk turns a bit so there is extra time for your child to formulate his/her ideas. It is also important to take the time to use the same word in different sentence structures so the important words gain some natural repetition. For example "I see bubbles, let's blow the bubbles....look at the bubbles, they are flying. This is an exciting time for your baby as s/he has started to use his/her voice to make meaningful sounds. Listen to what your baby is attempting to tell you rather than jumping in to correct how s/he forms the speech sounds. Over time the precision of speech sound production should emerge.

With focused attention to their parent's voice and exposure to a rich language environment babies begin to learn to recognize sound patterns as meaningful words. This does not require the use of fancy flash cards or electronic "apps". But rather caregivers engaging a baby in meaningful interactions through everyday experiences such as wiping her face, picking her up or preparing a bottle. EVERY verbal interaction you have with your baby has potential to

create neural connections for auditory brain development. As babies connect meaning to the sounds of the words they hear they are in a sense “organizing them into their auditory file folders” much the way we organize documents into files on a computer.

Remember, there is no exact road map or set of instructions to develop language. There really isn't even a *final* destination where language learning is complete because we have the potential to continue to refine our skills throughout our lives. So, fasten your seat belts and enjoy the ride as you enjoy the truly miraculous journey of language learning with your baby. If at any point you are concerned about your baby's pace of development consult with a certified speech-language pathologist. Your pediatrician should have some resources for you to contact a therapist or agency that can provide a screening or full evaluation. Some children are simply “late talkers”, but don't take that chance by waiting to see what happens. Trust your own instincts and consult a professional as soon as you become concerned.

Here are some pointers to use along your journey:

- Narrate your actions as you go about the day trying to encourage vocal turn taking often.
- Use short, simple, but grammatically accurate sentences when you talk.
- Try to reduce the background noise when you engage your baby in play so s/he doesn't have to work to separate your voice from the other sounds.
- Sit close to your baby and speak in a soft volume.
- Sing songs daily. The rhythm of your voice helps to hold your baby's attention to your voice.
- Make up songs about your actions. As your baby starts to talk make up silly songs.
- Stash books everywhere so you come across them often in your daily routine.
- Read or even just talk about books with lots of enthusiasm in your voice. Make book experiences fun and playful and/or cuddly snuggle moments to make positive associations around sharing books.

- Remember, attention to books is a process that develops slowly over time with experience.
- Add frequent and at times extended pauses into your interactions.
- Last but not least, make sure your baby has some time to explore toys without constant verbal input. Babies need time to think too!

For some fun baby activities check out the baby activities board by "Language Launchers" on Pinterest. Language Launchers Inc. is a company with products created to empower parents with information and activities to take their child's language to new heights. For more information you can check out www.LanguageLaunchers.com