

The Gift of Gab: The overlooked key to unlocking academic success

Did you know one of the most important gifts you can give your child is words? If you said yes, you are likely in a minority of parents who understand the educational power packed into the “Gift of Gab.”

A recent survey (April 2013 by Language Launchers) asked parents to quickly list the top 5 abilities or factors they felt were most important for a child’s overall academic success. Results showed that less than half the people listed ANY aspect of speech or language proficiency. Of the small amount of people who did list any aspect of speech/language (following directions, understanding others, or speaking ability) 80% were either speech-language pathologists or parents with children with language deficits. Apparently there is an epidemic of “You don’t know what you’ve got till it’s gone” going around!

The fact is that a child’s vocabulary ability upon entering school is a prime predictor for school success or failure. Without a solid language base a child is likely to have difficulty learning in any academic subject. Even the language of a math lesson is dependent on understanding basic concepts (more, less, most, few, many etc) and following directions. They don’t call those challenges “Word Problems” for nothing! It’s not only about academic success either, what about language as the foundation for social skills, making and maintaining friendships, play skills, imagination, problem solving, abstract thinking, humor, sarcasm, and conversational competence?

Preschool and Elementary classrooms may claim to include multi-sensory experiences but overall they are still primarily AUDITORY LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS which depend on understanding spoken language. Even a mild language delay caused by frequent middle ear fluid or infections in the early formative years (or we may say “early ears”) can have serious impact on speech clarity or general learning ability in later elementary years. A child starting school with weaker language comprehension needs to focus more on *hearing and listening* to the words. A child with particularly strong language comprehension is easily able to understand the teacher and can use brainpower to *think* about the *information* being taught which helps store the information into memory. Basically, babies begin their journey by first “learning to listen” and then they use that “listening to learn language”. By the age of 3 or 4 years they are already “using language to learn information and general knowledge”.

Parents typically do encourage and wait expectantly for the *first* handful of words to emerge. However, far fewer parents continue to give conscious thought to how they

may *enhance* their baby's language learning potential unless an actual delay or disorder is diagnosed. Parents can have positive (or negative) influence on their babies overall rate and quality of communication development. Neurologists have determined that the neuroplasticity of the brain, and greatest language learning potential, is in the first 3 ½ years of life. Taking a spectator approach to language development in those early years is not the most efficient way to build a strong foundation for a baby's education. Playful *interaction* is critical to optimize language and there is NO app for that!

Don't panic! A few simple strategies can add language value to everyday interactions with your baby.

First, share books often during the day.

Make books playful, cuddly, interesting, and most important accessible throughout your home. Babies don't start with attention to books, they learn to attend to books through positive experiences over time.

Have conversations with your baby and leave space for him/her to respond even if s/he is not yet capable. Babies need conversational turns to practice their interactions.

Use grammatically accurate sentences when you talk.

Give simple explanations and narrate your actions together even if your baby can not yet understand.

Make time EVERYDAY for talking together with your full undivided attention. You'll make some amazing discoveries along the way as your baby grows up!

Sing songs often during the day. It doesn't matter if you can carry a tune or even if you know the words....make up words to go along with your activity.

Yes, one of the most important gifts you can give your child is words! So, whether you are *Babbling with Babies* TM or *Chatting with Children* TM give "The Gift of Gab" today!

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Pamela Talbot and Kimberly Nertney are speech-language pathologists and founders of Language Launchers Inc. with a mission to inspire ALL parents to take their child's language to new heights. Learn about products through www.LanguageLaunchers.com or explore fun activities and resources collected on Pinterest boards under Language Launchers.