



Encouraging Words

Language Development from Birth to Age Five

It all begins with encouraging words. This series helps families understand the importance of language in developing literacy skills. Children use oral language skills when learning to read and then use reading skills to advance language. Families learn that reading and writing are not independent of speaking and listening. The series includes information on brain research as it relates to receptive language, expressive language, and print awareness. It offers advice to parents who may ask, "When do I need to be concerned?" The programs feature interviews and insight from parent educators, early childhood specialists, and medical professionals and will go on location to demonstrate activities that promote language development.

For information on additional family resources, contact:

**Center for Promoting
Family Learning and
Involvement**

3877 Fairfax Ridge Road
Fairfax, VA 22030



For more information on the series, contact:

Fairfax Network
4414 Holborn Avenue
Annandale, VA 22003
800.233.3277



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Receptive Language

Receptive language is what children hear when they listen. It is how children understand what they hear, and later it is needed for understanding what they read. Receptive language helps children understand the talking they hear from others. Like all language learning, in order to listen, children must first be aware and able. That means hearing must be intact, and there must be exposure to language (talking). Hearing words begins as a mystery to infants, but, after hearing words repeatedly in relation to other words, actions, and emotions, they quickly assign the words meaning; subsequently, they understand.

Expressive Language

Following the development of receptive language is the growth of expressive language. Although receptive language is present from birth, we don't hear evidence of this—words—until children have gained enough insight from listening to be able to speak. Expressive language is what children do when they talk. Children's speech increases incredibly as they grow. The more they talk, the more they add variations to their words, new vocabulary, and phrases. As a parent, you notice certain cues such as changes in tone of voice (even mimicking your tone of voice), gestures, and changes in rate of speech. As children become more adept at using these cues, the easier it becomes to understand them. And the easier it becomes to understand your children's speech, the more you reward them with positive responses like smiles, hugs, and verbal responses.

Build Your Child's Receptive and Expressive Language

In *Encouraging Words*, many examples of communication methods are demonstrated. The methods below take nothing more than practice on your part. As you see your child as a communicative partner, language and communication become a natural part of your daily existence as a family.

Parallel Talk

With parallel talk you speak for your child from your child's perspective. Parallel talk describes what your child is seeing, hearing, or doing as he or she does it. For example, you see your daughter holding her doll. You might say, "You have a doll. You are feeding the doll. She is hungry." Note that repetition is used. Repetition helps a young child learn. Also notice that not too many words are used, and the words that are used are simple. Too many words would overload the child. Not every action needs to be described.

Descriptive Language

Even before your baby starts asking, "Wha . . . dat?" you can use descriptive language to provide the answers. Description provides words, labels, and descriptions of objects in your child's world. For example, in describing what your child is playing with, touching, or seeing, you might say, "That is a fast car. It is red. Uh-oh, one of the doors is broken. See, this one is broken."

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Self-Talk

For some parents, self-talk is the most challenging activity; for others it is the absolute easiest form of expressive language. In self-talk, you talk about what you are doing while your child is watching. As you talk, you use short sentences to describe your actions. This type of talk seems to be of greatest benefit to children who are between 2 months and 24 months old. A sample might be: "I am making you lunch. I am getting the bread. Now I am spreading the peanut butter and jelly. Now I'm cutting your sandwich in half."

Expansion

Using expansion language means adding more information to the words that your child uses to talk about objects or actions. What you are basically doing by adding more words is revising and completing your child's speech, but you are doing it without directly correcting what your child has said. This method requires careful listening on your part. For example, your child might say, "Car." Considering the where, when, and circumstance you might reply, "Yes, that is Poppy's car." As another example, if your child says, "Car go" you might respond, "We are driving the car to the grocery store."

Expansion-Plus

Once your child is using his or her own short, simple sentences, you can add descriptors, prepositions, pronouns, and verbs to make the sentences more complete. For example your child might say, "Daddy, go bye-bye." You might respond, "Yes, Daddy is going to work." You are not correcting your child's sentence so much as adding more information to it.

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Print Awareness

Children learn to read and write in much the same way that they learn to talk. Children who are immersed in an environment of printed words and adult encouragement will read and attempt to write early. We do not wait for a certain age to teach these skills; children's curiosity develops naturally with opportunity, attention, and encouragement. A young child today is considered an emergent reader, not a nonreader. Families that encourage literacy tasks, answer children's questions, encourage drawing and scribbling or writing attempts, and read to their children really are teaching their children how to read and write. *Environmental print* plays a large role in this learning or acquisition process. What is environmental print? It is the print that is all around us: street signs, traffic signals, labels on products such as toothpaste and cereal boxes, and handwritten notes on the refrigerator. It is the EXIT sign on a door, or the word *Pull* on the door to a restaurant. It is the male or female shape on the restroom door at the store. Knowledge of signs around us can serve as the basis for children to begin learning about the alphabetic system. Letters make words. Words have meaning. People see and read the words. People understand and do what the words say. Children realize that to communicate they too must learn to read and write.

Infant

Where do I end and my mother begin?
This woman who comforts, cuddles, and feeds me.
Where do I end and the sunshine begin?

I am all the world.
I am the air, the blanket, the breast.
My form is encompassed, protected.

My arm is the door to the hall.
My leg, the crib I lie in.
My eyes are the light coming through each
separate pane in my window.

My fingers are my mother's arms.
My mouth and satisfaction is my mother's breast.

I am all the world,
and all the world touches me. . .

I laugh.
I cry.
I simply smile and their touch becomes me,
and I grow.

Today a man's arms held me.
Today I grew.

Today a tear touched me.
I knew not where I ended and where the tear began,
for I am all the world, and
all the world shall touch me.

Robin Stern Hamby, ©1982

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Make Brain Connections— Read to Your Child

It is never too early to start reading, singing, or reciting poetry to your child. Even a young infant loves to cuddle with you while you read a book. He or she will quickly realize the pleasure in touching a book, looking at its bright pictures, listening to the sing-song of your voice. A young infant will even mouth a cloth or vinyl book. Now that's sinking your gums into a good book! Babies have short attention spans; they may cuddle with you only a few moments while you read to them. That's okay. Follow their cues.

Toddlers should have story time every day. They look forward to reading short, simple books. Many toddlers have a special book that they want read over and over again. They like the thick-paged books so that they can turn the pages themselves as you read. Choose books on topics that your child enjoys. Does he like trucks? Does she like animals? Children love it when you change your voice while reading. Make your voice sound like the characters in the story. Ask your child to find things in the pictures. Ask questions about the pictures or the story. Remember that a child this age first "reads" the pictures. With time, the child notices the print, connects the print to the pictures, and understands that one page flows to the next pages, thus making a story. Follow the words with your finger. Refer to the beginning, middle, and end when talking about the book. Most of all, have fun! Here's an example from *Encouraging Words*:

Book—*Goodnight Moon*

- Parent:** Do you want to hear
Goodnight Moon? This is
one of my favorite books.
- Child:** Moon!
- Parent:** Yes, there it is. What else
do you see?
- Child:** Cow.
- Parent:** You are right. There is a
picture of the cow jumping
over the moon! Here, help
me turn the page.
- Parent:** Look at the bears. Let's
count the bears.
- Child with Parent:** One, two, three . . .

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Make Brain Connections— Read to Your Child

There are hundreds of good books for toddlers—too many to list here. But here are some to get you started and some to grow on. . .

For Babies:

Baby's Mother Goose published by Platt & Munk

What Is It? by Tanya Hoban

Baby's First Words by Lars Wik

Eye Winker, Tom Tinker, Chin Chopper: 50 Musical Fingerplays by Tom Glazer

For Toddlers:

Brown Bear, Brown Bear What Do You See? by Bill Martin, Jr.

Are You My Mother? By P. D. Eastman

Jamberry by Bruce Degen

Pat the Bunny by Dorothy Kunhardt

The Very Hungry Caterpillar by Eric Carle

Goodnight Moon by Margaret Wise Brown

For Preschoolers:

Where the Wild Things Are by Maurice Sendak

This is a story of Max, who dreams he becomes the king of all wild things.

The Popcorn Book by Tomie de Paola

Have you ever wondered about the best way to store popcorn? Or how many types of corn there really are? How old is the oldest popcorn ever discovered? *The Popcorn Book* is an informative and entertaining book that answers these questions and more.

Gregory, the Terrible Eater by Mitchell Sharmat

Gregory, a goat, likes to eat fruits, vegetables, eggs, fish, bread, and butter. Gregory's parents are worried. Gregory should be eating shoes, newspapers, tin can, old coats, and junk. What will they do?

Gilberto and the Wind by Marie Hall Ets

The Tale of Peter Rabbit by Beatrix Potter

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When Should a Parent Be Concerned?

Parents and educators agree that children who use lots of words by the time they are five are more likely to become good readers. Children develop at different rates, however, and the experts' lists and lists of developmental milestones, including those referenced by *Encouraging Words*, always contain that important caveat. But when should educators or parents become concerned? And once concerned, what steps should they take? Trust yourself. If you are worried, look for a professional who will take your concerns seriously and help you sort out what you have observed. For children who are over 20 months of age, most school systems have in place what is typically called "Child Find." This is an early intervention identification and treatment service. If there is a problem, the earlier it is diagnosed the sooner your child can get the help she or he needs. See the resources page for a list of organizations that may prove helpful. The survey on the following pages will help to assess the communication skills of children from birth to age five years. If your response is NO to any of these, you may want to consult your pediatrician, a professional speech and language clinician, or a developmental pediatrician.

**Reading
Books
With
Children
One to Two
Years Old**

One- to two-year-olds like:

- Books with big pictures.
- Familiar pictures, like home, family, animals, toys.
- Simple, brightly colored pictures.
- Short rhymes or poems with sounds that are repeated, like classic nursery rhymes.

How to read to your child:

- First, give your child a book with pages he or she can turn easily. As your child turns the pages, point to and name the pictures.
- When your child is familiar with the book, let him or her point to or name the pictures.
- Tell your child a story by describing the actions in the pictures.
- Read only as long as your child is interested. Young children may be able to pay attention for only a few minutes.

**Reading
Books
With
Children
Two
to Three
Years Old**

Two- to three-year-olds like:

- Pictures with a little more detail.
- Short, simple stories.
- Stories and pictures about familiar things.
- Simple make-believe stories.
- Same story read over and over without changing the story in any way.
- Words that rhyme, including nonsense words.
- Sounds of all sorts, particularly funny sounds, and things that make noise such as cars or animals.

How to read to your child:

- Reading time may be as long as six minutes.
- Simplify the story if necessary, so there are fewer words per picture. Or choose books in which the pictures tell a lot of the story.
- Let your child help with the reading. Ask your child to find things in the pictures or to join in repeating familiar words or phrases from a favorite book.

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Reading Books With Children Three to Four Years Old

Three- to four-year-olds like:

- Stories that tell about new things.
- Pictures books with more detail and action.
- Different kinds of stories. They like to hear about what they are doing, as well as about things outside the home.
- Animal stories and stories about boys and girls like themselves.
- Simple sequence stories. They like to recognize what is coming next in the story.
- Stories that repeat words and phrases over and over.
- Sounds, repetition of sounds, word play, rhymes.

How to read to your child:

- Reading time should range from 6 to 10 minutes.
- Ask questions about the story or have your child retell parts of it in his or her own words.
- Let your child interrupt the story with questions and comments.
- Answer questions and listen to your child's comments, even if it means not finishing the story.
- Read the same stories over again. Your child learns something new each time.

Reading Books With Children Four to Five Years Old

Four- to five-year-olds like:

- Picture books with more words.
- Stories they can understand—pictures and stories with more detail.
- Make-believe stories about animals and toys that talk and act like people.
- Stories about real people and things they see in the community, like firefighters and police officers.
- Word plays with jingles and rhymes. This helps them learn to listen to the sounds of words.
- Stories that tell the how and why of things in simple words.

How to read to your child:

- Stories may range from 10 to 15 minutes in reading time.
- Be dramatic as you read. Change your voice for different characters and imitate animals and machines in the stories.
- Allow enough time to read a story, but keep it short enough so neither of you becomes tired.

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Suggested Resources

Web Sites

www.ala.org/parents/index.html

The American Library Association Resources for Parents, Teens, and Kids has wonderful book lists for all ages.

www.asha.org

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association site contains information on speech, language, and hearing disorders.

www.ciera.org

The Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement is a national center for research on early reading.

www.naeyc.org

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) is an organization of early childhood educators.

www.lincs.ed.gov

The Literacy Information and Communication System has a guide designed for parents of young children.

www.Parenthood.com

This site offers general parenting information.

www.parentingme.com/language

This site looks specifically at language.

www.pbs.org/wholechild/

This site contains information presented in *The Whole Child* child development video series and telecourse.

Free Books From the United States Department of Education

Building Your Baby's Brain: A Parent's Guide to the First Five Years.

Ear Infections and Language Development

Ready to Learn: Essential Tips for Early Literacy

Order online at www.ed.gov/pubs/edpubs.html or call 1-877-4ED-Pubs (877-433-7827) or write:

Education Publications Center

U.S. Department of Education

P.O. Box 1398

Jessup, MD 20794-1398

References adapted for this guide are from *Basic Parenting Focus Issue*, developed by Nancy Kristensen, for the Family Information Services January 2000 Minneapolis, MN. 800-852-8112.

This guide was written and compiled by
Robin Stern Hamby, Special Projects Teacher
Center for Promoting Family Learning and Involvement
Instructional Services Department—Fairfax County Public Schools