

### Language Development from Birth to Six Months

Learning how to talk is a "developmental milestone" reached by most young children. It is a task that begins at birth and continues throughout one's life. There is much that can be done to foster young infants' language development in the first six months of life. Besides understanding what happens in the early stages of language development, parents, caregivers and other adults can promote and encourage early communicative efforts by being caring, responsive, and interactive.

Infants go through several stages or levels of language development before they begin to understand words or form their first words. Infants' first communication is through their crying. Through interaction with others, the baby learns that crying will be responded to and over time learns to cry in different ways in order to make his/her needs known. It is critical to remember that at this stage, as well as later, to respond to the crying infant and attend to his/her needs. It is not possible to be "too responsive" to an infant nor does responding to a crying baby lead to a "spoiled" child.

When a baby is 1 to 2 months old, s/he begins to coo. Cooing involves self-comforting, non-crying sounds. This is when we hear infants make sounds such as "ooooo" or "aaahhh". Babies are very happy when adults talk back to them or imitate their "ooo"s and "aaah"s and may smile invitingly and vocalize to start such a "conversation". Cooing is followed by consonant-vowel patterned sounds such as "ba ba" or "da da", and then high-pitched screeching (which many infants do with much glee).

By about six months, babbling begins. When infants babble, they begin to experiment with the feelings of the sounds their own voices make and will babble while alone or with others. Babbling involves playing with sound and babies will "test" how loud or quiet they can be and will try different pitches with their babbles. In fact, Sachs (1992) found that babbling babies may use stress and

intonation in a consistent manner when referring to their parents, favorite toys, and other important people and objects in their worlds. This means that a baby will use a certain babble to call to his/her mother and a different kind of babble when calling out to the family dog.

There are numerous activities parents and other adults can use to help babies communicate. Talking often with the baby is the first important thing to remember to do. Talk about and even "discuss" with the infant what you are doing while you are doing it, such as diapering, preparing a bottle or about what the baby might be doing when looking at a toy or making bubbles with saliva. Talking with and to the infant can become natural and spontaneous. Research conducted by Huttenlocher and others (1991) and McCartney (1986) found positive relationships between later language outcomes and babies who heard more talk directed to them by adults compared to those babies that did not receive such talk.

Even more important than what you say to an infant, is "how" you say it. Your voice's tone and your facial expressions will reflect your true emotions. Saying that you are happy to see the baby in a bored voice and with a frown on your face will not communicate to the baby that you are happy to see him/her.

Singing to an infant is a fun way to elicit the infant's attention since it is "different" from speaking. Songs such as "Baa baa black sheep" and other childhood favorites or more contemporary songs work equally as well. Along with singing, play games that use repetition. Some all time baby favorites include peek-a-boo or "how big is baby?". Over time, the infant learns to expect that a certain "sound" goes with a certain situation. For example, an infant learns that her arms are raised when the adult says happily, "So big!".

To enhance learning to talk, infants need time with adults who are sensitive and responsive to both