**Talking Toddlers: Seven Tips to Help Develop Language Skills**

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A nine-month-old child is typically developing if he can speak even one word. With the benefit of proper scaffolding, he'll know fifty to one hundred words within just a few months. By two, he will speak around 320 words; a couple months later — over 570. Then the floodgates open. By three, he'll likely be speaking in full sentences. By the time he's off to kindergarten, he may easily have a vocabulary of over 10,000 words.

For years, the advice has been that the way to kick-start a child's language learning was to simply expose kids to massive amounts of language. However, as we explain in our book ["NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children,"](http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Books/excerpt-nurtureshock-po-bronson-ashley-merryman/story?id=9272348) the newest science has concluded that the central role of the parent is not to push massive amounts of language *into* the child's ears. Rather, the central role of the parent is to notice what's coming *from* the child and respond accordingly.



With that in mind, we shared some of the scientists' hottest tips in children's language learning.

**1. Baby Talk May Sound Silly But It's Really Good For Kids**
Baby Talk: We've all done it — that oddly sing-song, slow, giddy cadence that people suddenly use when speaking to children. There's actually a lot of research on baby talk — the scientific expression for it is *parentese*. Its patterns and cadence are so universal, that scholars can play a recording of someone speaking in a language you've never heard before, and you'll still know if the person was talking to a baby.

Some parents are adamant against baby talk; instead, they want kids to hear adults speak normally. But that's the wrong approach. Parentese's exaggerated qualities help children's brains discern discrete sounds. By elongating vowels and stressing transitions more clearly, parentese helps a baby brain's auditory cortex recognize vowel-consonants groupings. And some use of it helps until a child's second birthday.

[*Click here to read an excerpt from "NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children."*](http://abcnews.go.com/GMA/Books/excerpt-nurtureshock-po-bronson-ashley-merryman/story?id=9272348)

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**2. Labeling objects**
One of the ways parents help babies and toddlers learn language is through what's called "object labeling" — telling them, "That's your stroller," "See the flower?," and "Look at the moon."

While babies may look at an object of a parent's interest, they learn more from object labeling when the parent isn't intruding or directing the child's attention. Instead, the parent is following the child's lead: object labeling is the most effective when the parent describes an object that the baby is already focused on – gazing, pointing or vocalizing. But timing is everything: the word has to be heard just as an infant is looking or grabbing after it to make sure that the child connects the word to the right object.

**3. Beware criss-cross labeling**
The danger in overzealous object labeling is that you might inadvertently crisscross the child: that is, don't put words in his mouth that aren't really there.

Say a baby, holding a spoon, says "buh, buh." But a mother doesn't respond to the child's *object* of attention; instead, she responds to the the "buh" – *sound* the baby had made. So the mother replies with: "Bottle? You want your bottle?" Inadvertently, she just crisscrossed the baby: she taught him that a spoon is called "bottle." While proper object labeling can accelerate word learning, frequently crisscrossed labeling can slow it to a near halt.

**4. Use Motionese**
When adults talk to young children about small objects, they frequently twist the object, or shake it, or move it around — usually synchronized to the sing-song of parentese. This "motionese" is very helpful in teaching the name of the object. Moving the object turns the moment into a multi-sensory experience. This helps attract the infant's attention and ensures that the child attaches the right label to the right object.

Children have better recall for words learned via multi-sensory exposure. But the window to use motionese closes at fifteen months: by that age, children no longer benefit from the extra motion.

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**5. Expose Your Child to Multiple Speakers**
University of Iowa researchers recently discovered that fourteen-month old children failed to learn a novel word if they heard it spoken by a single person, even if the word was repeated many times. The fact that there was a word they were supposed to be learning just didn't seem to register. Then, instead of having the children listen to the same person speaking many times, they had kids listen to the one word spoken by a variety of different people. The kids immediately learned the word.

Hearing multiple speakers gave the children the opportunity to hear how the phonics were the same, even if the voices varied in pitch and speed. By hearing in the speech what was different, they learned what was the same.

**6. Use Frames To Teach New Words**
You might think kids need to acquire a certain number of words in their vocabulary before they learn grammar — but it's the exact opposite. Grammar teaches vocabulary.

A typical two-year old hears roughly 7,000 utterances a day. But 45% of utterances begin with one of these seventeen words: what, that, it, you, are/aren't, I, do/don't, is, a, would, can/can't, where, there, who, come, look, and let's. Throw in some two and three word combinations, known as frames, and scholars can account for two-thirds of what a toddler hears in a given day.

These word frames are vital frames of reference. When a child hears, "Look at the \_\_\_," he quickly learns that \_\_\_ is a new thing to see. Whatever comes after "Don't" is something he should stop doing — even if he doesn't yet know the words "touch" or "light socket."

Without frames, a kid is just existing within a real-life version of Mad Libs — trying to plug the few words he recognizes into a context where they may or may not belong.

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**7. Variation Sets**
The cousin to frames are "variation sets." In a variation set, the context and meaning of the sentence remain constant over the course of a series of sentences, but the vocabulary and grammatical structure changes. For instance, a variation set would thus be: "Rachel, bring the book to Daddy. Bring him the book. Give it to Daddy. Thank you, Rachel — you gave Daddy the book."

In this way, Rachel learns that a "book" is also an "it," and that another word for Daddy is "him." That "bring" and "give" both involve moving an object. She heard the past tense of "give," that it's possible to switch nouns from being subjects to direct objects (and vice versa), and that verbs can be used as an instruction to act (Give it) or description of action taken (She gives).

Variation helps, if it's used about 50% of the time. More than that, the sentences become too varied: the kids lose the connection between the sentences.