

Speech and Language Development in Infants

What you can do to support your baby's speech and language development.

The early years are very important for building your baby's brain. Everything your baby sees, touches, tastes, smells or hears helps shape their brain for thinking, feeling, moving and learning. Here are several things you can do at home to support your baby's speech and language development.

Talk with your baby

The more words babies hear, the more words they understand and say as toddlers. It is important to talk to your baby in a way that is accurate and simple but still holds their attention. Research shows that how you talk and engage with your baby can influence how much your baby babbles. Babbling is a key forerunner of word production. In addition, research has shown that toddlers in families who spoke the most with them knew more than twice the number of words of toddlers who families did the least talking. Toddlers learn more words hearing language in one-on-one situations than hearing language in group situations.

Use sign language

Some parents think that using sign language with their babies will slow their language development, but just the opposite is true. Before babies can use words, they can produce gestures (e.g. wave "bye bye"). In fact, children can use sign language as early as 8 months of age. Studies have shown that children who are exposed to signing can have higher language and IQ scores than kids who are not exposed to signing. Using sign language may also help toddlers have better social skills and fewer tantrums. See our handout "Using Sign Language with Your Child" at seattlechildrens.org/pdf/PE1906.pdf.

Avoid screen time

Media is a major force in children's lives. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that infants and children under age 2 avoid TV and other entertainment media including phones, tablets and computers. There are many videos available for babies and toddlers that claim to increase language and intelligence. However, recent research suggests that when babies and toddlers watch TV and videos, it may contribute to delays in their speech and language development. Research from Seattle Children's found that children who were exposed to TV from infancy knew fewer words than children who didn't watch TV.

To promote brain and language development, spend time reading, talking and singing with your baby. For more tips, read our handout "Screen Time" at seattlechildrens.org/globalassets/documents/for-patients-and-families/ce/CE053-screen-time.pdf.

To Learn More

- Speech and Language Services
206-987-2104
- Ask your child's healthcare provider
- seattlechildrens.org

Free Interpreter Services

- In the hospital, ask your nurse.
- From outside the hospital, call the toll-free Family Interpreting Line, 1-866-583-1527. Tell the interpreter the name or extension you need.

Multiple languages

Young children have a keen ability to learn language and can often learn more than one language with ease. Parents may worry that teaching more than one language will delay their child's language development. Research suggests that this does not happen. Possible advantages to learning more than one language can include:

- Being able to learn new words easily
- Better sound awareness including rhyming and breaking words down into sounds
- Increased ability to determine categories of words
- Improved creative problem-solving skills
- Good listening skills
- Better ability to connect with others

To help your child learn multiple languages, it is important that you expose them to the languages and provide many opportunities to use them. Use these tips to help your child with language learning:

- Give your child as much exposure to the second language as possible. Aim for using the language 20 percent of waking hours.
- Speak to your child in languages in which you feel comfortable.
- Use both languages from the start and give your child many opportunities to hear and practice using both languages in everyday situations.
- Spend time with friends who speak the language.
- Foster a respect for the culture and traditions of the family.
- Spend time in countries or communities that speak the language.

For more information

- American Academy of Pediatrics recommendation on screen time, aapublications.org/news/2017/05/04/PASScreenTime050417
- American Speech-Language Hearing Association ASHA.org
- British National Literacy Trust talktoyourbaby.org.uk
- Talaris Institute parentingcounts.org
- University of Washington Infant Brain Labs, modules.ilabs.uw.edu/outreach-modules
- Washington Thrive by Five lovetalkplay.org
- Early Support for Infants and Toddlers at: 206-263-9105
website: kingcounty.gov/depts/community-human-services/developmental-disabilities/services/babies-toddlers.aspx