



## Talking to Young Children Makes a Big Difference!

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If you search the internet for information about ways to promote your young child's development, you'll find many websites that suggest that you "talk to your child." Many studies have shown that the amount and quality of language that children are exposed to has a huge impact on their communication development and success at school [1].

A recent study by researchers at Stanford University uncovered one of the reasons that parents' conversations with their children make such a difference. These researchers studied 29 children when they were 19 months old, and then again when they were 24 months old. The children wore special clothing with a digital recorder in the pocket that recorded approximately 10 hours of:

- the child's speech
- speech that adults directed towards the child
- overheard speech (speech directed to adults or other children in the household, but not directed to the child in the study)

They also measured:

- **the children's ability to process speech** – they showed the children pairs of pictures (e.g. dog/baby) and then said a sentence which named one of the pictures. They watched to see where and how quickly the children looked when they heard the word that named one of the pictures. This allowed them to determine how efficiently the children processed the speech they heard.
- **the children's vocabulary** – they determined how many words the children knew at age 24 months.

The researchers noticed some interesting patterns:

- **The amount of speech directed to the child varied a lot** – One family said more than 12,000 words to their child, while another family said only 670 words to their

child over the course of the day. Researcher Fernald stated, “that’s just 67 words per hour, less speech than you’d hear in a 30-second commercial” [2].

- **Children who heard more speech directed to them had better speech-processing skills** – These children learned to pay better attention to words and respond quickly when hearing speech.
- **Children who heard more speech directed to them at 19 months knew more words at 24 months** – This was due to their improved ability to process speech. Therefore, talking to children promotes their word learning by sharpening their ability to pay attention to and process new words quickly.
- **overheard speech did not affect children’s vocabulary size** – Just being exposed to speech that is spoken to others in the environment or on TV is not enough to improve early vocabulary development. Toddlers learn language when they engage in enjoyable interactions with those around them [2].

## How to Talk to Your Young Child

From the moment they are born, parents begin talking to their babies. The suggestion to “talk to your baby” seems almost unnecessary as parents seem programmed to do this right from the start! But how often you interact with your child and the way you interact with your child can make a huge difference. By following these five simple guidelines, you will set your young child on the path towards language learning:

- **Be face-to-face** – one of the best ways to let your child know that you want to talk to him is to be face-to-face. This means joining your child at his physical level, whether that’s on the floor together, facing him in his high chair, or sitting together at the table. Make eye contact with your child and let him know that you are listening and interested.
- **It takes TWO to talk** – Talking with your child doesn’t mean that you should do all of the talking! Pause and wait for your child to send you messages. And when it’s your turn to talk, talk about what interests your child. By following your child’s lead, you let him know that you are interested in what he has to say, which will make him want to have longer conversations with you.
- **Use simple, grammatical sentences** – Young children benefit from hearing proper sentences (like “give it to Mommy” or “do you want a cookie?”), as opposed to sentences that have missing words (like “ta ta Mommy” or “baby want cookie?”). The grammar in sentences helps young children figure out what the words mean and how they are used together.
- **Use your voice, face, and hands** – Gesturing with your hands and face (such as pointing, shrugging your shoulders, or frowning) helps young children understand the meaning of your words. And your voice can also help with word meanings – such as making your voice rise upwards as you say the word “up”.
- **Any time is conversation time!** – You don’t need special toys or activities to encourage your child’s language. You can have conversations at the grocery store about what you need to buy and pick out food together. You can talk about what you see as you go for a walk around the neighbourhood. And bath time is a great time for conversation! Spending time talking about your child’s interests throughout the day is what makes a difference.

By allowing your child to lead and talking about his interests, you will have many opportunities to provide your child with good language models. And your child will get the message that you are an interested conversation partner. These interactions will help your child tune-in to words, and promote his vocabulary and overall language development.

## References

1. Weisleder, A. & Fernald, A. (2013). Talking to Children Matters: Early Language Experience Strengthens Processing and Builds Vocabulary. *Psychological Science*, 24(11), 2143–2152.
2. Carey, B. (October 15, 2013). Talking directly to toddlers strengthens their language skills, Stanford research shows. Stanford News. Retrieved from <http://news.stanford.edu/news/2013/october/ferald-vocab-development-101513.html>.

### About The Hanen Centre

*Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.*

*For more information, please visit [www.hanen.org](http://www.hanen.org).*

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