



Making Sure Children Get Their Daily Dose of Language Nutrition

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When we think of children and nutrition, images of broccoli and carrots come to mind. But there is another type of nutrition children need in order to thrive – and that's language nutrition.

What is language nutrition?

In a recent article, Head Zauche and her colleagues from Atlanta, Georgia set out to determine which factors had the biggest impact on children's language development. They looked at 103 studies of children's language outcomes to figure out the key ingredients of language nutrition. They describe language nutrition as the talking, interacting, and book reading that parents engage in with their children. Because children's environments during their first three years shape their language learning, it's important to understand which aspects of this environment are the key to more advanced language development^[1].

The studies in the researchers' review included children who were developing typically, as well as children with language or other developmental delays.

Here's what the researchers found to be the most important aspects of **language nutrition for children's language development**:

- **The quantity and quality of parents' speech makes a difference**
 - **The amount of speech directed towards children has a very important influence on their vocabulary** – however, it's not just about how many words children hear. The researchers also found that children need to hear words within motivating, back-and-forth conversations in order to learn.
 - **Hearing a variety of different words from caregivers predicts children's language development** – this means that children should hear more than the names of objects and people. They need to hear words that describe things (big, soft), action words (jump, sleep), location words (in, there), greeting words (bye bye) and question words (where? what?), to name a few.
 - **Parents who use a variety of grammatical sentences with their children tend to have children who have larger vocabularies, use longer sentences, and use more advanced grammar.**

Because children's environments during their first three years shape their language learning, it's important to understand which aspects of this environment are the key to more advanced language development.

- **“Parentese” helps young children pick out words from sentences** – parentese refers to the exaggerated speech caregivers tend to use with babies. It involves lots of repetition, animation in the voice, longer speech sounds, and a slower pace.
 - **Parents who use more gestures when they speak tend to have children with stronger language skills** – in particular, gestures that focus children’s attention on something, like pointing to objects that catch the child’s interest or showing what the word means (like raising arms for “up”), were found to be very helpful for language learning.
- **Language is learned during responsive interactions**

The researchers noticed a common theme in many of the studies: the importance of both language input from parents and social interaction. Language learning isn’t passive – it is learned through back-and-forth conversations with caregivers during motivating social interactions ^[1].

- **Responsive interactions with caregivers promote children’s vocabulary, grammar, and school readiness** – being responsive involves paying attention to and talking about whatever it is that’s caught the child’s attention (and not changing the topic or testing the child’s knowledge). It also involves allowing him to start the interaction and send messages and then following his lead. Studies in the review showed that responsive interactions with caregivers predicted when children achieved certain language milestones (such as first words and two-word combinations).
 - **Overheard speech or language from media viewing does not promote children’s language skills** – some studies looked at whether language learning was improved when children overhear speech (but are not interacting when they hear it) and when they hear language through various media (like watching TV or viewing something on a computer or iPad). Neither of these situations helped children learn language.
 - **Children’s language and thinking skills benefit from interactions where the caregiver is positive and sensitive** – interactions that were more negative in tone, intruding on what the child was doing or restricting what he could do (e.g. by telling him exactly what to do) were related to poorer language and cognitive outcomes.
 - **The extent to which parents played with their child, engaged him in learning activities, and taught him about new things was associated with improved language and cognitive skills.**
- **Book reading and literacy activities promote children’s development**
 - **Sharing books frequently with children encourages their vocabulary, language complexity, understanding, and thinking skills.**
 - **The way parents share books with their children makes a big difference** – asking questions, encouraging the child to participate, and introducing a variety of new words and concepts promotes children’s understanding, vocabulary, grammar, and literacy skills. Therefore, it’s not just the quantity of book reading that makes a difference, but also the quality.
 - **Story-telling, nursery rhymes, singing the alphabet, and activities which teach numbers and letters encourage both language and literacy development.**

The bottom line...

The important adults in a child’s life can make a huge difference when it comes to promoting language development. By talking, interacting, and reading in responsive ways, parents can ensure their child’s language gets off to the best possible start.

The language nutrition ingredients identified by Head Zauche and her colleagues lie at the foundation of the Hanen approach:

- Responsive interactions lie at the heart of the Hanen approach. Language learning takes place within fun, motivating, back-and-forth interactions with caregivers who respond to their child’s interests. By following their child’s lead

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during every day routines and while playing together, parents create opportunities for their child to communicate.

- Parents learn strategies that ensure their language is geared towards their child's level. By using short, grammatical sentences, emphasizing important words, and using lots of repetition and gestures, parents can help their child take the next step in his language learning.
- Books are a wonderful activity to promote language learning. Parents learn strategies to turn book reading into a time for conversation, where they can expose their child to new words, build his understanding, and extend his thinking beyond the pages of the book.

We've been busy updating the [It Takes Two to Talk® guidebook](#) ^[2] so that children will get an even bigger boost of language nutrition. The new guidebook now includes information about:

- social interaction goals for children, so they can learn to start more interactions and take more turns during interactions with their caregivers
- parents' use of short but grammatical sentences that build children's understanding of words
- providing lots of repetition so children have many opportunities to hear and learn new words

The 2017 edition of *It Takes Two to Talk* will be available in May.

References

1. Head Zauche, L., Thul, T. A., Darcy Mahoney, A. E., & Stapel-Wax, J. L. (2016). Influence of language nutrition on children's language and cognitive development: An integrated review. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 36, 318-333.
2. Weitzman, E. (2017). *It Takes Two to Talk: A Practical Guide for Parents of Children with Language Delays*. The Hanen Centre: Toronto, ON

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.

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