

Building Language and Literacy Skills

A baby's brain is primed for acquiring language. When young children are around caring and responsive adults who talk with them, engage them in conversations, read to them every day, and teach them songs and rhymes, they are eager to communicate. Because infants, toddlers, and twos are very motivated to engage with others and communicate, you can make a difference that will last a lifetime.

Infants, toddlers, and twos need you to offer intentional experiences every day in order for them to acquire the building blocks of language and literacy. These include experiences that enable children to acquire vocabulary and language skills, hear the different sounds and rhythms of language, enjoy books and stories, and explore writing.

Vocabulary and Language

One of the greatest achievements in the first 3 years of life is the development of oral language. This includes the ability to understand the words that they hear (receptive language) and to put their own ideas and feelings into words so they can communicate with others (expressive language). A child with a good vocabulary and language skills can engage in conversations, share ideas and feelings, ask and answer questions, and work through problems.



From the time they utter their first word around their first birthday, until they are about 3 years old, children learn words and how to put them together at an astounding rate. Their language learning is supported by caring and responsive adults who talk to them, label and describe experiences and objects, and engage them in conversations.

People once thought it is not important to talk to babies because they do not understand what is being said. We now know that adults should use every opportunity from birth to talk to babies, describe things, reassure them, and sing to them.

Some children come from homes (and programs) where they hear 215,000 words every week (around 30,700 words a day). Compare that with children who hear only 62,000 words each week (around 8,800 words a day).¹⁹ By age 3, the difference in the vocabularies and language use in these two groups of children is tremendous. Children who have rich language and literacy experiences usually have about twice the vocabulary of children who do not.

Researchers have found that language experiences in the first 3 years are one of the most reliable ways to predict reading ability by third grade.²⁰ Reading, after all, is getting meaning from the printed text. The more words a child knows, the more he understands when someone reads to him and, later, when he learns to read, himself. Once children fall behind, it is very hard for them to catch up. In school, they fall further and further behind. You can make sure that the infants, toddlers, and 2-year-olds in your care hear and learn to use a lot of language.

Children will show you in many ways that you are helping them develop vocabulary and language skills.²¹

A **young infant** might...

- calm down when you sing a favorite lullaby or talk to him in a quiet, reassuring voice
- turn her head toward you and smile when you speak to her
- make sounds directed to you, listen intently when you imitate the sounds, then repeat the sounds again and again
- lift his arms up when you come to his crib and ask, “Do you want to get up?”
- make sounds like “Ma-ma” and “Da-da”

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A **mobile infant** might...

- understand some words: wave her hands when you say, “Bye-bye,” or point to a ball when you ask, “Where’s the ball?”
- string sounds together and repeat the sounds in a sing-song voice that begins to sound like speech: “Ba-ba-BA-BA-BA-ba-ba-ba”
- point toward and look at an object he wants, saying, “Uh, uh”; then look at you and back at the object, repeating the sound until you hand him what he wants
- respond when you ask, “Where is your nose?” by pointing to her nose
- use 10–50 single words that refer to people, objects, and events, simplifying some words (for example, *ba* for *bottle*, *ma* for *more*, *bow-wow* for *dog*)
- communicate with signs or pictures if he is unable to speak

A **toddler** might...

- point to different body parts as you sing a song like “Head and Shoulders, Knees and Toes”
- combine words into two-word sentences: “Daddy car.” “More milk.”
- use a questioning intonation to ask questions: “What dat?” or “Go out?” or “Where mommy?”
- answer simple questions: respond when you ask, “Where is your coat?” by showing you her coat
- understand and respond when you say, “Let’s put the blocks in the box.”
- learn 50–200 words by age 2
- use signs or pictures in a sequence to express an idea: *baby* + *cry*

A **2-year-old** might...

- begin to use language to get information by asking *who*, *where*, *what*, and *why* questions: “Why you going?” “What this?” “Where teddy?”
- use language to express ideas and feelings: “No go outside.”
- use 2- to 5-word sentences to communicate
- begin to use prepositions (*in*, *on*), pronouns (*me*, *he*, *we*), negatives (*can't*, *don't*), and conjunctions (*and*)
- understand and follow directions and simple stories

The Sounds and Rhythms of Language

The ability to hear and distinguish the sounds and rhythms of language is a very important skill for reading. During the preschool years, most children develop *phonological awareness*, the ability to hear the small units of sound in spoken language. They notice rhyming words in songs, poems, fingerplays, and stories. They enjoy playing with words, such as saying “Banana-fana-fo-fana.” Preschoolers begin to hear and clap the syllables in their names: Son-ya; Ty-rone. They also notice that some words start with the same sound: *cat* and *cake*; *Denise* and *Danny*.

During the first 3 years of life, the brain is very receptive to learning the sounds that make up language. Every language has its own set of sounds that are used to form words. These sounds are called *phonemes*. If children are with adults who talk and sing with them, they pay attention to the sounds and rhythms of the languages they hear. By around 6 months of age, infants have learned to babble and repeat the sounds that make up the languages they hear.

Children under age 3 can develop *sound awareness*, the ability to notice and recognize different sounds, which is the first step in developing phonological awareness. Newborns have the ability to distinguish their mother’s and father’s voices from other voices or noises they hear around them. You may have noticed that young infants pay particular attention to the type of speech called *parentese*. When you talk slowly in a high pitched, sing-song voice, face-to-face with an infant, he is likely to pay attention to you long before he understands what you are saying. You may feel a bit silly, talking this way, but it is very effective in getting infants to listen to your voice.

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Everyday experiences help children develop sound awareness. When you talk with children, play songs and sing the lyrics, recite nursery rhymes, and do fingerplays, you are helping children become aware of the sounds and rhythms of their language. When you make such experiences a part of your everyday work with young children, they will develop this very important awareness.

A **young infant** might...

- recognize his mother's or father's voice before he sees them
- put sounds together ("ba-ba-ba"), listen intently when you imitate them, then repeat the sounds again and again
- calm when she hears you sing the same lullaby she hears at home

A **mobile infant** might...

- string sounds together in a sing-song voice
- anticipate the part of a song where you do something interesting: "Trot, trot to Boston. Trot, trot to Lyn. Watch out, Jeremy! Don't fall...IN!"
- make the sounds of animals and things: "Baa-baa"; "Choo-choo"

A **toddler** might...

- repeat the refrain from a song she has heard many times: "E-I-E-I-O"
- fill in the rhyming word in a predictable refrain when you pause before saying the word
- recognize familiar sounds in the environment: the siren on a fire truck, a chirping bird, a car horn, the ring of a phone

A **2-year-old** might...

- play with the sounds in words you have taught her, for example "Nanabana"
- make up their own word games: "Silly, Willy, Billy"
- repeat words they enjoy hearing, "Pop, pop, pop"
- repeat familiar phrases from songs and rhymes

Enjoying Books and Stories

Reading books and sharing your pleasure in language and stories are among the most important gifts you can give to infants, toddlers, and twos. Children who regularly hear stories read aloud develop a foundation for literacy, including the motivation to learn to read. That is a key ingredient for success in school. Most children who enjoy being read to develop a love for books that will last throughout their lives, enriching their experiences and stretching their imaginations.

Long before infants can focus their eyes on the pictures, turn the pages, and understand the words you are saying, they can begin to associate books with the pleasant feelings they have when you hold them on your lap and share a book. Sharing books with infants, toddlers, and twos also builds other important literacy skills.

Vocabulary and language—Children learn new words as you share books about a variety of objects, actions, events, and places; link ideas in books with events and objects in children’s lives; and repeat words from books during daily routines. Books for twos contain words that are less commonly heard, and they often include more complex sentences than the conversational language used with very young children in daily life. The descriptive language in books and the synonyms for familiar words help stretch children’s language skills. Rich vocabularies and background knowledge are essential for children’s later comprehension of school texts.

How print works—Toddlers and twos begin to learn about print when you point out words and letters, run your finger under print, and talk about what you are doing as you handle a book (for example, “Let’s turn to the next page”). They begin to realize that pictures and print are meaningful and that books in English are read from front to back, one page at a time.

Letters and words—Some twos are beginning to recognize a few letters, usually the first letters of their names and some letters in environmental print, such as the M in the McDonald’s logo or the S in a stop sign. They may enjoy finding these letters in simple alphabet books.

Comprehension—This is the ability to make sense of what is heard or read. Infants take their first steps toward comprehending print when they point to pictures in a book. Toddlers and twos begin to relate events in a story to their own lives, and older twos begin to retell familiar stories.

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Understanding books and other texts—As you read stories to young children, they become aware that stories have beginnings and endings. They begin to understand that the phrase “Once upon a time” starts some stories and “The End” signals the end of some stories.

Phonological awareness—The types of books you read to children help them become aware of the sounds of language. Sound awareness, which is the first step in the development of phonological awareness, is discussed in the previous section.

As you share books and stories with young children, you will be rewarded by how much they are learning from these experiences.²²

A **young infant** might...

- gaze at the bright pictures in a book you are holding or one that is propped up where she can see it
- wave, suck, chew, and manipulate the pages of a cardboard or cloth book
- vocalize as you read a book with simple, repetitive language

A **mobile infant** might...

- play with the moving parts of a book (for example, tabs to push, open, or pull)
- help you turn the pages of a book as you hold it and read
- hand you a book; then snuggle against you for as long as ten minutes as you read and talk about the pictures
- laugh or smile when he sees a familiar picture in a book you are sharing
- make sounds and point to pictures as you read each page
- point correctly to the picture of a familiar object when you ask where it is (for example, “Where’s the dog?” “Can you show me the baby’s eyes? Where are the baby’s ears?”)
- shake his head when you read a book like *Is Your Mama a Llama?* and you say, “No-o-o. My mama’s a...”

A **toddler** might also...

- turn a book that is upside-down until it is rightside-up; then look at each page, turning one page at a time
- make animal noises or other appropriate sounds, such as “Moo, moo” or “Choo, choo,” in response to pictures or something you read
- pretend to read the story, babbling as if she is reading the text
- point to a picture and ask, “What dat?”
- make connections between the content of a story and what he sees around him (for example, get a truck after seeing one in a book)
- fill in the next word when you pause before a rhyming word; repeat the words in a familiar predictable book

A **2-year-old** might also...

- select books on her own and pretend to read a familiar story, repeating phases accurately, especially from predictable books
- talk about the events or characters in a story: “Grandpa and me went to zoo. We saw tigers. And lions too!”
- protest when you misread a familiar word or leave out a word
- ask to read you a favorite book again and again
- retell some of the details of a familiar story
- comment on the characters in a book (for example, “That cat’pillar is hungry.”)

See chapter 13, *Enjoying Stories and Books*, for ideas about selecting books and making reading experiences enjoyable for infants, toddlers, and twos.

Exploring Writing

Reading and writing go together. A group of letters is a symbol for a word, just as letters are symbols for sounds. Long before children can recognize letters and read or write letters and words, they begin to understand that one thing can represent something else (for example, a picture of a banana can represent a real banana; a block can stand for a car; particular golden arches mean McDonald’s).

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Children learn about writing if they see print in their environment, hear it read aloud, and see you writing for different reasons. Toddlers and twos are fascinated when they see you writing. They want to imitate what you do. At first, they have no idea what you are doing; they simply notice that you are taking an object, moving it across a piece of paper, and leaving marks. Over time and with experience, they begin to understand the purposes of writing.

Older infants, toddlers, and twos can begin to learn about and experiment with writing if they see pictures and print and if you give them drawing, painting, and writing tools.

A **mobile infant** might...

- watch as you write a note
- make random marks on paper with large crayons

A **toddler** might...

- grasp a large crayon and bang it on a piece of paper to make marks
- draw horizontal and some vertical lines, and circular marks
- move a paintbrush across a large sheet of paper until it is almost completely covered with paint
- make lines and circles in finger paint; then cover them up and repeat the process

A **2-year-old** might...

- experiment to see what kinds of marks she can make: lines, dots, zigzags
- make a series of looped scribbles and tell you, "This my mommy."
- tell you he wants to write a letter and then scribble all over a piece of paper
- point to her name on her cubby and tell you, "My name."
- begin to recognize common symbols in the environment and some letters, especially the first letter in his name
- draw lines and make marks that begin to look like letters
- ask you to write something for her, such as a story or letter that she dictated or her name on a picture

Promoting Language and Literacy Learning

Children gain language and literary skills when you offer them rich experiences and materials and talk with them. The chart that follows summarizes what you can do and say to promote their learning.

Language and Literacy Learning	What You Can Do and Say
Vocabulary and Language	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Explain what you are doing during routines: “I’m going to change your diaper now. You will feel much better when we’re finished. First I’m going to…”• Use a high-pitched, sing-song voice and talk face-to-face with infants to get their attention. Speak slowly, and use short sentences and simple speech.• Converse by listening attentively and engaging in back-and-forth exchanges. Use gestures, facial expressions, or other cues to increase their understanding.• Describe what a child is doing: “You like those nesting cups, don’t you? You like banging them together. Now you’re banging them on the floor. Look! You put one inside the other, and it fit!”• Expand on what a child says: When he says, “Go out,” you can say, “Do you want to go outside to play?” If she says, “More milk,” you can say, “You finished all of your milk. You must have been thirsty. Now you want more milk. Here it is.”• Share picture books with photos or objects that children can point to and name.• Ask open-ended questions to encourage children to verbalize their ideas. If a toddler points to her shoes and says, “New shoes,” you can say, “I see that you have new shoes. They are blue. How did you get those shoes?”• Listen carefully and wait patiently as children express themselves. Do not rush them.• Label storage containers and shelves with picture and word labels.• Describe and talk about what children see, hear, feel, taste, and smell, for example, on a walk outdoors.

Language and Literacy Learning	What You Can Do and Say
<p>◀</p> <p>Sounds and Rhythms of Language</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imitate an infant’s babbling and encourage her to imitate the sounds you make: “I hear you saying, ‘Ma-ma-ma-ma.’ Now you’re saying it back to me.” • Recite nursery rhymes, clapping along with the beat: “Patty cake, patty cake baker’s man. Bake me a cake as fast as you can.” • Talk about the sounds animals make: “What does a cow say? Moo. What does a dog sound like? Woof-woof.” • Sing songs that encourage children to listen for and anticipate an action: “Ring around the rosie....Ashes, ashes, we all fall DOWN!” “Open, shut them....but DO NOT PUT THEM IN.” • Sing, recite nursery rhymes, and do fingerplays with children, emphasizing the words that rhyme and words that start with the same sound. • Read stories with rhymes and lots of repetition, such as <i>Is Your Mama a Llama?</i>, <i>Good Night Moon</i>, and simple Dr. Seuss books. • Read stories with rhyming refrains and pause when you get to the rhyming word so children can fill it in: “Brown Bear, Brown Bear, what do you see? I see a red bird looking at” • Play with words: “See you later, alligator.” “Let’s comb your hair, you little bear.” • Call attention to similarities of words: “<i>Tanya</i> and <i>Timmy</i> both start with the same sound: /t/. I’m going to tap, tap, tap, Timmy’s toes, toes, toes. I’m going to tap, tap, tap, Tanya’s nose, nose, nose.”
<p>Enjoying Stories and Books</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide cloth and soft plastic books that young infants can grasp, chew, and manipulate; cardboard books for mobile infants; and a range of story and content books for toddlers and twos. Display them attractively where children can reach them. • Hold infants on your lap as you read and show them books with simple, bright pictures. • Talk about the pictures. Label pictures a child points to: “That’s a bottle, just like yours.” Ask the child to find a picture, and ask questions about it: “Does he look happy?” • Let children play with and manipulate the book as you read, and encourage them to help you turn the pages. • Encourage children to chime in as you read a predictable book with repeated phrases. • Read books to children and tell stories every day, one-on-one and with small groups. <p>▶</p>

Language and Literacy Learning	What You Can Do and Say
<p>◀ Exploring Writing</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Let infants and toddlers see you writing and talk about what you are doing: “I’m making a list of what I need to buy so we can make pancakes tomorrow.” • Point out print in the environment, such as letters on alphabet blocks, children’s clothing, or displays. • Make picture and word labels for materials in the room, and label children’s cubbies and belongings with their names. • Show and talk about pictures: “This is a picture of your mommy and daddy.” “Can you find the picture of the puppy on this page?” • Provide large crayons, water-based markers, paint and brushes, and large chalk for toddlers and twos. Offer plenty of plain paper so they can use these tools to make marks, scribble, paint, and explore writing.

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