

L is for Language

Creating a Language-Rich Environment

Children develop language-related skills long before they say their first words. Communication, or sending and receiving messages, between an infant and caregiver occurs through an infant's use of eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, and sounds. Around their first birthday, young children often begin using simple words to communicate. From birth, children's everyday interactions influence brain development and how they will share ideas with others. Research shows there are many ways to create language-rich environments through **relationships**, **repetition**, and **routines**.

Language-Building Strategies

Here are four strategies for nourishing young children's communication and language during everyday interactions.

Strategy 1. Join children in routines and activities.

Joining young children as they play or participate in daily routines, like meals or chores, provides repeated opportunities to interact with others. These interactions build the foundation for communication and language.

Strategy 2. Talk about what children are doing or what they see you doing.

Watch what interests a child and talk about it with him or her. Label things that the child is interacting with (e.g., "That's your ball.") or doing (e.g., "You are standing."). Children also learn words by listening to others talk. The more words you use to describe your and the child's experiences, the more opportunities the child will have to hear new words and practice using them. Encourage everyone who interacts with the child to provide a language-rich environment.

Strategy 3. Respond to children's communication.

Children communicate using eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, sounds, and words. Responding to children when they communicate encourages them to take turns while talking. This sometimes is referred to as serve and return interactions.

Strategy 4. Read and sing songs.

Reading books and singing songs teach children about the rhythm and sounds of language. Reading and singing also help children to learn how to sequence words and increases their vocabulary.

What We are Doing

The Anita Zucker Center and our collaborators work to support families and practitioners to implement everyday strategies to help children build communication and language skills.

Language-Building Strategies for Older Toddlers (19 to 24 months)

Strategy 1. Join children in routines and activities.

- Use crayons, paint, and paper to create art with an older toddler. Describe what he makes and hang it up where he can see it. Ask simple questions (e.g., “Who is that in the picture? Did you make a funny face?”).
- Go for a walk outside and collect interesting things, such as sticks or leaves. Talk about what you see and collect and ask simple questions about them. If the child asks, “What’s that?” be sure to respond by labeling what the child is interested in.

Strategy 2. Talk about what children are doing or what they see you doing.

- Let an older toddler help with laundry. Take turns putting clothes in the laundry basket. Describe what you are doing and label each piece of clothing you put in. For example, as you put a shirt in say, “I’m putting in a red shirt. It matches your sock.” Ask the child to label the clothing, its color, or its size.
- Help an older toddler do simple puzzles with shapes, colors, or animals. Ask the child questions about the puzzle or the pieces as she is putting the puzzle together.

Strategy 3. Respond to children’s communication.

- Repeat what an older toddler says and add more words to what she says. For example, if she says, “baby cry,” say, “Your baby is crying because she’s hungry.”
- Label and talk about the emotions an older toddler expresses. For example, if he hears a loud noise and begins to cry, say, “That was *loud*. It *scared* you.”

Strategy 4. Read and sing songs.

- Encourage an older toddler to label pictures she points to in a book. If she points but doesn’t say the word, ask, “What is that?” or say the word and then wait to see if she tries to copy you.
- Sing songs and tell nursery rhymes that provide opportunities for an older toddler to take turns singing or doing movements with you (e.g., patty-cake).

These illustrated strategies follow the milestones identified in the CDC guidelines for children from birth to five years old. For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/ActEarly.

