

# 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 Newborns (Less than 4 months)

### Strategy 1. Join children in routines and activities.

- During tummy time, lay down so a newborn can see your face. Repeat sounds she makes.
- Keep a newborn's attention by making different sounds and using different tones in your voice.

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

- Use 1 to 2 words to label objects you see or actions you do as you play with a newborn during everyday routines like dressing and bathing.
- During tummy time, label the toys a newborn looks at or reaches for (e.g., "That's a rattle.").

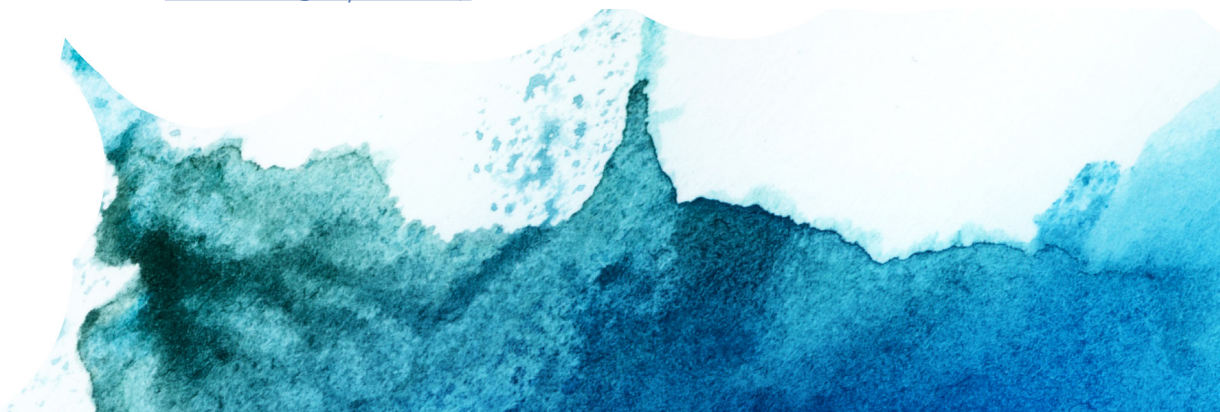
### Strategy 3. Respond to children's communication.

- When a newborn cries, respond with appropriate attention and care (e.g., pick her up and make soothing noises).
- When a newborn coos, respond with a smile, similar noises, and eye contact (e.g., "Yes, *ahhh*.").

### Strategy 4. Read and sing songs.

- Show a newborn bright, colorful pictures in books or magazines and use 1 to 2 words to label the pictures.
- Sing songs in the language you are most comfortable using.

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](http://www.cdc.gov/ActEarly).



## Language-Building Strategies for Young Infants (5 to 8 months)

### Strategy 1. Join children in routines and activities.

- When you are changing a young infant's diaper, imitate his sounds and see if he will make another sound back at you. When he does, repeat the sound again and continue back-and-forth (serve and return) interactions for a few turns.
- Play with a young infant during activities or with toys she likes. Make different sounds or say a word and then wait to see if she makes a sound.

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

- During diaper changes, describe your and the infant's actions and facial expressions. For example, "Look at that happy smile!"
- Repeat sounds an infant makes and say simple words with those sounds. For example, if an infant makes the sound "baa" while playing with a ball, say, "ball."

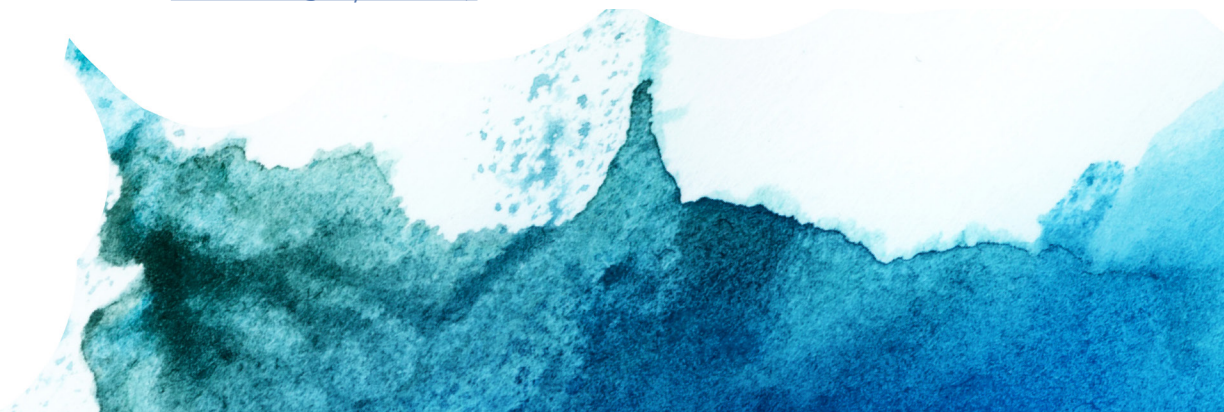
### Strategy 3. Respond to children's communication.

- When an infant looks at something, point to it and label it. For example, if she looks toward a book, point at the book and say, "You see the *book*." Emphasize the word *book*.
- When an infant babbles, respond with similar noises and eye contact. For example, if an infant makes the "waa" sound, say, "waa, waa." You might then make a different sound "ma, ma" and see if the child imitates you.

### Strategy 4. Read and sing songs.

- Look at and read books to an infant every day. Reread books often; infants learn words by hearing them repeatedly.
- Use facial expressions to show emotions when singing songs. For example, smile big with your eyes wide while singing, "If You're Happy and You Know It."

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## Language-Building Strategies for Older Infants (9 to 12 months)

### Strategy 1. Join children in routines and activities.

- Take turns while playing games with an older infant. For example, roll a toy car and wait for the infant to roll it back. Take another turn and continue the back-and-forth interaction. You might also make a “vroom” sound when rolling the car back and forth or say “I’m rolling the *car*.”
- Sit near an older infant during a meal time. Look at him and smile as you talk about what he is eating or how it tastes.

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

- When you walk outside, describe what you do, see, or hear. For example, point to the sky and say, “I hear an *airplane*.”
- Describe what you or an older infant does during a diaper change. For example, if she kicks her feet and smiles, say, “You look *happy*,” and emphasize the word *happy*.

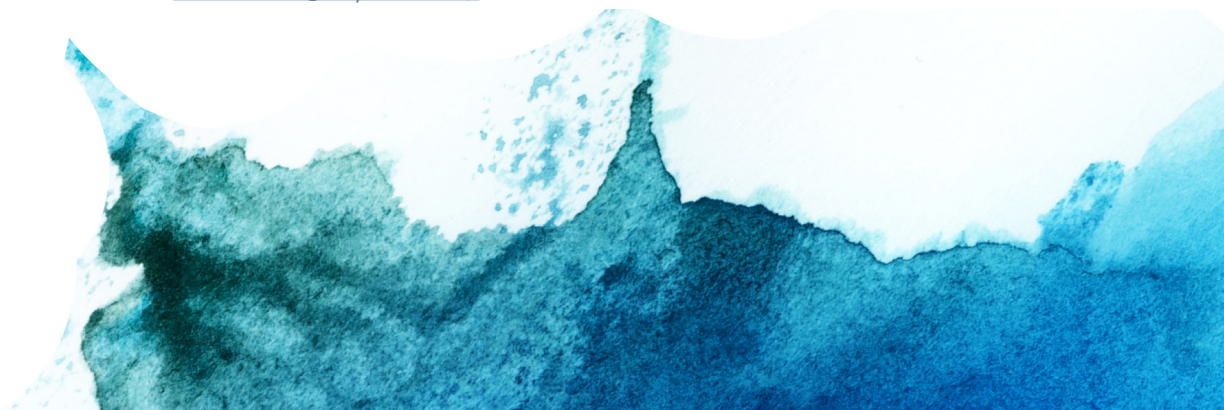
### Strategy 3. Respond to children's communication.

- Pay attention to how an older infant responds to new situations. If he starts to cry in a new situation, try to soothe him.
- Describe what an older infant wants when she reaches for something. For example, if she reaches her arms up, say, “You want me to pick you *up*,” and emphasize the word *up*.

### Strategy 4. Read and sing songs.

- Read to an older infant daily. Help her turn the pages. Label pictures and then wait to see if she tries to copy any of the sounds you make or pats pictures when you name them.
- Sing songs in the language you are most comfortable using. Encourage an older infant to make sounds or gestures as you sing.

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## Language-Building Strategies for Young Toddlers (13 to 18 months)

### Strategy 1. Join children in routines and activities.

- Play pretend with a young toddler using toys such as dolls and play food. Help him feed a doll or take turns putting play food in a bowl or on a plate. Map language onto the actions (e.g., “feed the baby,” “the apple tastes good,” or “stir the food”).
- Sit near a young toddler as she looks at books. Take turns turning the pages or help her turn the pages and talk about the pictures in the book. Ask the child to point to pictures when you name them. You can also ask the child to name the pictures or make sounds that relate to the pictures.

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

- During bath time, describe how a young toddler plays or what you do as you bathe her. For example, if she splashes her hands in the water, say, “You are splashing!” As you scoop water to rinse her hair, say, “I am getting some water. Next, I will rinse your hair.”
- Use words to describe your and a young toddler’s feelings. For example, if a young toddler rubs her eyes and cries near nap time, say, “You look sleepy.”

### Strategy 3. Respond to children’s communication.

- Respond to gestures, sounds, or simple words of a young toddler by labeling objects, actions, or feelings. For example, if a young toddler points to a cup, say, “cup” as you give the cup to her. If she says, “aah” while you put on her sock, say, “Yes, sock.”
- When a young toddler says a word, respond by repeating the word and adding more words. For example, if a young toddler says, “nana” while eating a banana, say, “It’s a sweet banana.”

### Strategy 4. Read and sing songs.

- Read books to a young toddler every day. Label the pictures in the book and then pause to see if she tries to repeat the word. If the child points to and names a picture in the book, respond by repeating the word and adding more words. For example, if a young toddler says “meow” and points to a cat, say, “Yes, it’s a cat and it says ‘meow’.”
- Sing songs with actions (e.g., “The Itsy Bitsy Spider”) and encourage a young toddler to do the actions and sing with you.

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## 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).

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## Language-Building Strategies for Children 2 to 3 Years Old

### Strategy 1. Join children in routines and activities.

- Help the child with chores. For example, help her clean up her spot at the table. Say, "Put your napkin in the trash." When she puts the napkin in the trash, say, "You are really helping me! What else can you do to clean up?"
- Build something together with blocks or other household materials like paper towel tubes. Ask questions about what to build or what to put on next.

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

- Describe the steps of a routine as you do them. For example, when it is time to brush teeth, say, "First we get the toothpaste...Now we brush... Turn on the water....It's time to rinse the toothbrush." Engage the child in describing what happens next in the sequence by not completing the sentence "Now we br..." [brush]. "Turn on the wa..." [water].
- Use words to describe objects and actions. For example, "I made a *tall* tower." "You are running *fast*." "It's a *yellow* car." "It's a *big* block."

### Strategy 3. Respond to children's communication.

- When the child asks a question, answer the question as soon as possible and then ask the child a related question.
- If the child asks to play or tries to talk and you are busy, say, "I can't talk/play right now, but I want to talk/play with you later."

### Strategy 4. Read and sing songs.

- While reading, talk about the pictures and characters in the book. Try describing characters' feelings or encourage the child to use words to describe the objects, characters, or actions shown in the picture.
- When singing familiar songs, sing one line of the song and then pause and wait for the child to take a turn singing the next line.

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## Language-Building Strategies for Children 4 to 5 Years Old

### Strategy 1. Join children in routines and activities.

- Draw a picture together. Use encouraging words while asking the child questions about the picture as she draws.
- Make a snack together. Let the child choose what to make and what he wants to be “in charge” of as you make the snack (e.g., spreading jelly on the bread). Ask the child what comes next (e.g., putting the bread slices together).

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

- Use words such as “first” and “then” when talking about daily routines to help the child learn and talk about the sequence of events. After he is familiar with the steps in the routine, encourage him to describe the steps to you.
- Talk about your and the child’s feelings. For example, “I am frustrated because I can’t find my shoe.”

### Strategy 3. Respond to children’s communication.

- Answer the child’s “why” questions. When you do not have the answer, find it together (e.g., ask someone else or look it up).
- Help the child label and talk about feelings. For example, if she has difficulty joining friends at a birthday party, say, “You look like you might be a little nervous because there are a lot of people we don’t know here. What would help you feel better?”

### Strategy 4. Read and sing songs.

- Read the same book more than once. Once you have read a book a few times, ask the child to describe parts of the story or experiences she has had that are similar to the story. For example, “What do you think happens next? You’re right, she goes to visit Grandma. Have you ever gone on a trip to visit someone?”
- Make up songs together. Take turns copying each other’s words and dance moves.

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