



Tap into Your Child’s Natural Way of Learning Language

Lauren Lowry
Hanen SLP and Clinical Staff Writer

Children achieve some amazing milestones as they develop more advanced language skills. By age six, the average child understands about 10,000 words! [1] This amazing feat happens without anyone actually teaching them these words. So how does this happen?

For decades, researchers have tried to figure out the process that lets children learn language without effort or instruction. They believe it has to do with children picking out patterns in the language they hear every day.

Picking out patterns

Questions are one way to help children participate in conversation, but there are other ways that are just as (or even more) effective at encouraging children to talk:

Children’s brains are wired to pick out patterns in language. Studies of the brain show that this type of language learning involves many areas of the brain working together, and that these areas are different than areas used for other types of learning [2].

The patterns children notice help them figure out whether a word is a noun, verb, adverb, etc., based on its position in a sentence and which words are often used with it. For example, children come to realise that the word “the” comes before a word that represents a thing or a person (e.g. “the boy”, “the car”). These patterns also give them clues about what a word means. As a child learns more and more about these patterns, he gradually learns the rules of a language.

It's amazing to think that all of this happens in the child's mind without him even trying and without us having to teach it! It's not surprising that children who are exposed to a lot of language that includes a variety of words and sentences tend to have stronger language skills, since this provides them with more opportunities to find the patterns in the language they hear [3].

What about children with language delays?

Children with delays in language development may have more difficulty picking out these patterns in language. However, studies have shown that they do pick out patterns; it just involves a bit more effort and they may need more exposure to language to find the patterns [2,4].

Because this type of learning depends on the language input a child hears, the way you speak to your child can make a big difference. There are some simple things you can do to help your child pick out patterns in language more easily:

- **Repeat key words in a variety of sentences** – if you use a new word a few times as you interact with your child, it's more likely that he will notice it. The more your child hears a word in a variety of sentences, the more opportunities he has to learn about what it means, what type of word it is (whether it is a noun, verb, adjective, etc.), and how to use it in a sentence. For example, if it's time for your child's snack (e.g. yogurt), you might use the word "spoon" in the following ways:
 - Do you want a big spoon or a little spoon?
 - Here's your spoon.
 - Put the spoons on the table, please.
 - Uh oh, your spoon fell down!
 - Oh, your spoon is dirty now. Let's get a new spoon.

You wouldn't use these sentences one after the other. You don't want to bombard your child or say things that don't feel natural. Instead, the idea is to use the word naturally as it comes up during everyday conversation.

By repeating key words in this way in different sentences, your child will notice some patterns – that "spoon" is a noun that describes a utensil used in the kitchen, that we add an "s" to the end if there is more than one spoon, or that you can describe a spoon with an adjective (e.g. "big spoon", "little spoon", "your spoon is dirty"). All of this information helps your child build his understanding of the patterns and rules of the language.

- **Repeat key words during different activities** – using the same word in a variety of activities gives your child more information about how to use the word and how it fits into different types of sentences. For example, you might use the word “wash” while you prepare food for your child’s snack (“I’m washing your grapes”), during bath time (“Let’s wash your face”), and while pretending to wash your child’s favourite doll during pretend play (“What should we wash first, baby’s arms or legs?”). In this way, your child will see a pattern emerge – that “wash” is a verb that is used to describe cleaning, and that it is followed by words that describe what you are washing (e.g. “your face”).
- **Use proper grammar** – it’s important to use grammatical sentences with your child because it allows him to hear how words go together to make sentences. This lets your child pick out the patterns and rules of your language. Sometimes people think it’s helpful to remove some of the grammar to make it simple for the child (e.g. saying “want cookie” instead of “Do you want a cookie?”), but this actually makes it more difficult because the child doesn’t get a chance to see how the words fit together and how the grammar works in the sentence.
- **Don’t ask your child to repeat** – children tend to know when they’re being tested and they can shut down when pressured to say words, especially if they are struggling with language learning. The beauty of this type of learning by picking out patterns is that it relies on our input, instead of requiring children to practice saying anything. By adjusting how you speak – repeating key words and phrases and making sure you use sentences with proper grammar – you will tap into your child’s natural way of learning language and provide many opportunities to find patterns in your input.

Interestingly, even though this type of learning doesn’t depend on the child saying anything, if you follow the above tips, your child might just try to use a new word or sentence on his own without you prompting it. Hearing this type of language input – with lots of examples of key words in a variety of grammatical sentences – often encourages and motivates children to try out the new language they hear. If that happens, you can keep the conversation going by adding something to whatever your child just said.

By tapping into this natural process your child has for learning language, you can help him learn about language with less effort, especially if he has delayed language development. These types of strategies are a large part of the approach used with toddlers who are late to talk in the Target Word™ program. For more information or to find out if your child might benefit from this program, you can learn about *Target Word* [here](#).

References

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4. Saffran, J. R. (2018). Statistical learning as a window into developmental disabilities. *Journal of Neurodevelopmental Disorders*, 10(35), 1-5.

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.

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