



It's Quality, Not Just Quantity, That Helps Your Child Develop Language

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If you have a young child, you may have been advised to “talk a lot” to your child. This is reasonable advice, and it’s based on research that shows that children who hear more words from their parents have better language skills and success at school [1].

But a recent study shows that it’s not just how much you say to your child that makes a difference to his or her language skills. The way you interact with your child also makes a big difference to how well his or her language skills develop [2]. In fact, researcher Kathy Hirsh-Pasek and her colleagues found that the quality of interactions between parents and children matters *more* than the number of words children hear.



What Is a “Quality Interaction”?

The researchers watched videorecordings of 60 mothers playing with their two-year-old children in order to figure out what types of interactions were helpful for learning language. They also counted how many words the children heard during these interactions. Then, they compared what they saw during these interactions with the children’s language skills when they were 3 years old. They found that the 3 year olds with stronger language skills had interactions with their mothers that involved:

- **Joint engagement** – This refers to a child and parent paying attention to and sending messages about the same thing. For example, imagine a little girl and her mother playing with a dollhouse. The little girl looks at a doll and does a gesture to mean sleep, while her mother puts the doll in the bed and says “Shhh....time for bed”. Both the little girl and her mother are having a conversation about the same objects (the doll and the toy bed). Joint engagement helps a child learn words

because the adult provides the words for the actions and objects the child is paying attention to. When a parent joins in and engages with something the child is interested in, the child naturally pays attention to what the adult is saying and doing.

- ***Familiar routines*** – activities that happen in the same way each time are routines, such as meals, bed time routines, and even familiar play activities. For example, when a parent and child have a special game they play together regularly like peek-a-boo or chase, and it's played the same way each time, it becomes a routine. Because routines are repetitive, the words and actions used in the routine become predictable, making it easier for children to learn them.
- ***Connectedness*** – When parents and children connect during interactions, it means they enjoy being together, take turns, and participate equally. Being connected while interacting motivates children to stay in the interaction longer and, therefore, provides them with more opportunities to learn.

While all three of these factors had an important influence on the children's language development in the study, connectedness had the biggest impact. And while the number of words the children heard had an influence on their later language, it was the quality of interactions they had with their mothers that made all the difference.

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The bottom line: Quality matters

It isn't enough to talk a lot with your child. It is when you are connecting with your child and paying attention to the same things that your child tunes in to what you are saying and learns new words. In addition, familiar and motivating interactions allow children to feel connected with their caregivers and increase opportunities to learn language.

Tips for Having Quality Interactions with Your Child

Follow your child's lead

The first step to having a quality interaction and connecting with your child is to follow your child's lead. This involves:

- observing your child to see what he is interested in
- abandoning your own agenda
- joining in with him and his chosen activity
- playing your child's way (not yours)

Join in with your child

You can encourage joint engagement and connectedness with your child by joining in with your child, no matter what it is that he's interested in. You can join in with your child by:

- doing what your child is doing – when you copy what your child is doing, it will naturally catch his attention and encourage him to keep the interaction going
- helping him do what he is doing – hand him Lego pieces or blocks for his tower. Find a way to participate without taking over the game.
- making comments about what your child is doing – after you say something, wait to see what your child does or says next

Use familiar routines to help your child learn language

There are many things you do every day with your child that are familiar and happen the same way each time. Reading a book together, helping your child get dressed, or playing horsie are examples of familiar routines. These are great times to engage with your child, get him involved, and expose him to new language. The familiarity of the routine will help him pay attention to what you are doing and saying, and help him learn new language.

By connecting with your child when you interact together, you will not only build his language skills, you will find new ways to enjoy each other's company and have fun together.

References

1. Hart, B. & Risley, T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experiences of young American children*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brooks.
2. Hirsh-Pasek, K., Adamson, L. B., Bakerman, R., Tresch Owen, M., Michnick Golinkoff, R., Pace, A., Yust, P. K. S., & Suma, K. (2015). The Contribution of Early Communication Quality to Low-Income Children's Language Success. *Psychological Science*, 26(7), 1071-1083.

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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