

HOW PARENTS TALK TO THEIR INFANTS

by Peter Ernest Haiman, Ph.D.

The quality of the verbal environment provided by parents to their infants and toddlers significantly influences their children's later academic success in school.

The mother is the child's first language teacher. Research shows that the mother's voice affects the baby in utero. During their last six weeks of pregnancy, a group of mothers-to-be read the same short children's story out loud twice each day until their babies were born. Several days after birth, experimenters placed earphones on each newborn and an electronic pacifier in the child's mouth. Sucking on the pacifier at one frequency switched on a recording of the story read by the mother to the baby in utero. Sucking at a different frequency switched on a recording by an unknown female. Most babies learned to suck at the frequency that brought the recording of their mother reading to them before they were born.

The quality of the mother-infant relationship has a significant influence on the child's acquisition of language. When a mother holds, smiles, and talks to her infant, she elicits her baby's cooing, gurgling, and other prelinguistic utterances. The amount and kind of nurturing given to a baby reflects the mother's personality. The mother's approach to motherhood shows whether she welcomes or fears her infant's birth and if she feels able to care for her baby. The mother's feelings and behavior significantly determine her child's development of language. A mother who is generally happy and talks to her baby as she goes about her daily tasks will facilitate her infant's acquisition of language. If, however, a mother is often worried, uncertain, tense, or quiet in her interactions with her young child, she can cause her child to have speech delays.

Even though an infant cannot speak, it is very important for parents to talk to their babies while feeding and dressing them, changing their diapers, playing with them, and engaging in other interactions with them. Studies have demonstrated a significant relationship between the quality of language a child regularly hears and the quality of language that child will speak. Although the child is an infant and cannot speak a word, it is important for mothers and fathers to talk in complete sentences. If parents primarily speak baby talk to the baby, language development will be impeded.

When parents talk to their infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, they should use complex sentences. Complex sentences have adverbs, adjectives, and modifying phrases and clauses. Rather than "bring me your shirt," say "bring me your red shirt." Rather than saying, "Mommy is coming," say "Mommy will come as soon as she dries her hands." The optimum development of language is fostered if parents use complete and complex sentence structures when interacting with their children during their first five or six years of life. Numerous studies that focused on the language development of children have consistently demonstrated that how parents talk to their youngsters shapes the children's language and ability to communicate. Language, in turn, shapes thought processes and mental problem solving.

Numerous studies have overthrown another old child-rearing myth: "Children should be seen and not heard." Practice plays a very important role in the child's development of language skills. Youngsters who have more opportunities to listen to and talk with adults will become more effective and successful communicators than those who don't have those opportunities.

In short, young children who are exposed to an enriched language environment at home and have parents who lovingly encourage them to practice speaking will become youngsters who

not only will speak accurately and clearly but also will go on to understand what their teachers say in school. The seeds of successful academic achievement have been well planted for children if, since before birth, they have heard their parents use complete sentences and have practiced the complex sentence structures modeled for them. These school-aged children will be ready to learn to read, write, and think using language because they are familiar with and able to understand and use the enriched language patterns employed by teachers. These complex language patterns also are similar to sentence structures they will encounter in the books they read at school.

Reference:

DeCasper, A. J., & Fifer, W. P. (1980). Of human bonding: Newborns prefer their mothers' voices. *Science*, 208, 1174–1176.