

How do toddlers learn language?

Children learn language by observing, playing, and engaging in interactions. There are several pre-linguistic skills that need to occur before children will have reason, desire, or need to communicate. Children need to have a desire or purpose to communicate so it is important that after infancy we don't always just meet their needs, but tell them what we are doing while we meet their needs. That way when they want to communicate a basic need, we have provided a way for them to do so. Children also need intent to communicate in order to learn language. If children don't have "intent" or a desire to communicate, they won't. It's that simple. So how do you know if your child has intent? Here are a couple questions to ask yourself: Does my child engage in eye contact during interaction? Does my child participate in reciprocal play or turn taking activities? Does my child show any interest in gesturing or pointing to items? Does my child show joint attention during activities (attending to the same things as someone else at the same time)?

If your answers to these questions are no, then we have some pre language work to do. If your answers are yes to these questions, then it is time to start working on encouraging imitation of words to build vocabulary and use of words, already in their repertoire, to meet their needs/desires.

How do they best learn new words? The best time to teach a child new words is during joint attention tasks such as reading a book together, playing with blocks or any toys together, and during daily routines when the child is in need of items etc. One thing to remember is to stay away from manner words during this vocabulary development phase. The reason for this is that children can and will use the words "please" and "thank you" to get through their entire day if parents let them. So this may discourage them from learning a new word. For example; a child reaches for a cookie and says "please". The parent gives the child the cookie. The child just missed an opportunity to learn the word "cookie". If this happens several times throughout the day, the child would miss several new word opportunities. Instead, when a child reaches for a cookie or any item of interest, they are showing an "intent" to communicate. This is the absolute best time for the child to learn a new word because they are motivated and have a desire or need to be met. So you provide the word "cookie" while getting the cookie, you hold it up next to your mouth and say the word "cookie", you then say "tell me,

cookie". At this moment, the next step you take is dependent on where the child is in their language development. If they are already imitating pretty consistently, then you encourage them to say "cookie" and perhaps try and go for accuracy in production of the word. However, if they are in early stages of imitation and language development you will accept whatever version of "cookie" they provide you. And CELEBRATE their attempt. It is at this stage that we need to encourage attempts and celebrate every attempt made because we need to encourage and reward attempts! By celebrating every attempt, we are encouraging language no matter how accurate. This creates a positive environment for language development which in turn will encourage continued attempts and ultimately develop language in a positive manner.

The next stage would be developing more 2-3 word phrases. We do this by using strategies called language modeling and language expansion. Language modeling is exactly what you think. Its modeling 2-3 word phrases during routines, play etc. We want to try and keep our language simple when interacting with them. That is how they will learn to use language. If we get too complex, it is too overwhelming and they may give up on communication. So keep it simple. Language expansion strategies are used to expand on what the child says. For example, if a child points and says "truck". We want to repeat back what he child says which acknowledges their communication, but we also want to expand on what they said so they can learn new words. So we say "big truck" or "I see truck" or "big red truck". That way we have exposed them to new words for their vocabulary.

A final thought.... As parents we need to keep in mind that their little minds are working all the time. They are processing what we say and what they hear constantly and sometimes that processing takes a little longer than what we expect. So we need to be mindful of giving them time to process information and to make attempts at repeating what we are giving them. We also need to provide plenty of periods of silence for them to practice language and even initiate language during play and routines. So be mindful of your actions; how much you are talking, are you using simple language, and are you expanding on what your child says.

Children should learn language naturally but these strategies should help give them an edge.

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