

ARTICLE

Learning New Words is Fun!

Article authored by:

Holly Hatton-Bowers, PhD, UNL & Julia Torquati, PhD, UNL

Have you ever traveled somewhere where you could not speak the language? Then after some time you begin to learn words to describe objects or ideas? It can feel exciting to begin to understand the language and connect to others through a shared language. This is because words connect us to each other and to the world. Words are also tools for thinking because words represent ideas. When children learn new words, they begin to develop new ideas and can begin thinking about the world in different ways.

It is amazing that babies are born ready to learn words. As a parent, you can support them in learning new words in everyday interactions. One effective and helpful way to do this is talking to babies in a style called “motherese/parentese” or “baby talk” or “infant directed speech” that includes slowing down the tempo of speech, elongating vowels, more clearly articulating consonant sounds, and using a higher pitch and singsong voice (i.e., varying pitch) that engages babies’ attention. To illustrate, imagine yourself as an infant trying to make sense of this:

Hellosweetieareyoufeelingssleepylthinkitstimeforabinkieandasong

Compared to this:

“Helooo sweetie! Are you feeling soooo sleeeepy? I think it’s time for a binkie and a song.”

When you talk in this way, you will notice that your eyes may be brighter and the tone of your voice is more inviting, which will capture and hold the baby’s attention to your words.

These characteristics of motherese/parentese helps babies to begin identifying and understanding different meaning units of speech that help them to learn new words. Repetition and emphasis also help babies make connections between the words you use and their meaning, for example:

Do you see the DOGGIE? He's such a nice DOGGIE.

Using gestures such as pointing helps signal to the baby what you are talking about.

Talking to your infant or toddler about your everyday routines will also help them to learn new words. Your baby is interested in you and everything you do, so you can teach new words by narrating your actions: *"It's time to get the mail. Let's see what's in the mailbox"* or *"Daddy is making soup for supper. See how I'm stirring the soup? Does that smell so yummy?"* Ask questions even when your baby is too young to answer, because they are learning how to participate in the back-and-forth exchanges of conversation. Young infants might respond to your pause by moving their bodies, and older infants will respond by cooing, babbling, and eventually using words and groups of words – phrases and sentences.

Young children readily learn new words through songs. Rhythms and pitch in songs highlight differences in words and phrases, and patterns of repetition and rhyme help children remember words. You can make it playful and silly by making up your own verses and inviting your child to add to the song. For example, you could add different kinds of animals to "Wheels on the Bus" (*"the doggie on the bus goes woof woof woof!"*) and ask your child what other animals might ride the bus. Children learn more readily when they are happy and having fun.

What new words will you teach your child today? Children are eager to learn about their world through languages. Share your experiences and interests with them using rich, descriptive language that connects them to you and the world around them. Remember to make it fun

Additional Resources:

- Tips on learning to talk from birth to three years (Zero to Three): <https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/301-tips-on-learning-to-talk>
- Helping young children learn new words (Extension Alliance for Better Child Care): <https://childcare.extension.org/helping-young-children-learn-new-words/>
- 12 ways to support language development for infants and toddlers (National Association for the Education of young Children): <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/support-language-development-infants-and-toddlers>