

Talk to Me, Baby!

How You Can Support
Young Children's
Language Development

by

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Tips for Talking with Toddlers

- Respect the toddler's wariness of strangers and her need to be in control. If you don't know the toddler well or haven't seen her for a while, approach her slowly, looking just past her rather than directly at her. Give her a chance to reach out or follow you. Watch her face as you offer a greeting, and back off a bit if she seems wary. Put a toy on the floor between you. If she takes it, you can comment on what she is doing. If not, show her what you can do with it. Talk about what you are doing, then offer her the toy again.
- Talk to the toddler on his level. Squat down or sit beside him. Comment on what he is doing or seeing. Offer him an intriguing object, or join his play by playing along, providing appropriate words or sound effects. Make eye contact with him as you ask a question or make a suggestion.
- Respond to the toddler's efforts to keep the conversation going. Whether she uses babble-talk, gibberish, sound effects, gestures, signs, or words, give her the words for what she seems to be trying to say, and pause so that she can repeat the word more clearly.
- As you interact with the toddler, respond empathically to his emotional tenor. If he's excited by a game of rolling and catching a ball, play your part with exaggerated excitement. Your exuberant "You caught the ball!" is likely to be greeted with an equally exuberant laugh, babble, or attempt at speech. On the other hand, if a toddler is upset or fussy or just quietly reflective, a gentle, soothing voice is more likely to engage his attention and less likely to provoke a negative reaction.
- Provide a play-by-play description of the toddler's activity and perceptions, just as a sportscaster might comment on a player's actions. When the toddler looks at you with interest or chimes in with words or babbles, stop your narrative and give her a turn to talk.
- Use language to help the toddler interpret his world. When you see a puzzled or fearful expression, find a simple way to explain what is going on or what is going to happen.

(continued)

Tips for Talking with Toddlers *(continued)*

When the doorbell rings, explain that someone is at the door and wants to come in. Show the toddler the bell, and let him help you push it. When you pull the plug on the sink, explain that the water is going down through the pipe, all the way down to the ground.

- Use language to reassure the toddler and to prepare her for transitions. “I can’t pick you up right now, but I can watch you go down the slide.” “It’s almost lunch time. One more slide, and then we’ll go inside.”
- Talk about a recent event that was special for the toddler. Use props or pictures to help him remember.
- Take breaks and breathers during conversations with the toddler. Most toddlers need simple, short sentences and plenty of time to take in the information and formulate a response.
- Sing favorite songs frequently, and encourage the toddler to join in. Listen for the point when gibberish turns into words. Pause before a key word in a song or rhyme to give the toddler a chance to fill it in all by herself.
- Respond to anything that sounds like a word and is used with communicative intent. For example, when a child who hears a plane overhead points to the sky and says, “Ane,” you might answer, “I see the plane. The plane is high up in the sky.”
- Give the toddler time to repeat a new word.
- Provide the toddler with many opportunities to practice using the words he knows. Read his favorite books over and over so that he can practice naming the pictures. Find a magazine or catalog with pictures of similar items that he can name with the words he knows.
- Use words to help the toddler name and manage her strong emotions. “That was a loud noise. It made you scared.” “You’re angry because Sam took your toy.”
- Repeat the toddler’s communication in words. If you are unsure, ask for confirmation, giving him a chance to repeat

the word or gesture or to correct your interpretation. Use full but simple sentences.

- Accompany language with gestures that the toddler can copy. Clap “hooray,” nod “yes,” shake your head “no,” or wave “bye-bye.”
- TALK—AND LISTEN—A LOT.

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