

Development of Oral Language

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Periods of Development

- **Antenatal:** Nine months of pregnancy
- **Infancy:** Birth through 1 year
- **Toddlerhood:** 1 to 2 years
- **Early Childhood:** 2 to 6 years
- **Middle Childhood:** 6 to 11 years
- **Adolescence:** 12 to 18 years
- **Young Adulthood:** 19-30 years
- **Middle Adulthood:** 31-60 years
- **Old Adulthood:** 61+ years

Antenatal Language Development

- Fetuses can differentiate sounds by 33 weeks (about 8 months)
 - The brain shows a high level of activity when hearing different languages or unusual voices
- In a research study, mothers were asked to recite a short poem 3 times a day for the last 4 weeks of pregnancy
 - Babies' heart rates slowed when their mother recited that poem, but did not slow when their mother recited other poems.
- Fetuses respond to music
- **WARNING:** Very high levels of sound may harm prenatal brain development

Antenatal Language Development: Implications

- Auditory (sound) systems in the brain may be developed by:
 - Natural sounds of a mother conversing with others
 - Exposure to music (But only at reasonable decibel levels!)
- There is no evidence that extra-ordinary efforts at language development are helpful at the antenatal stage

Language Development in Infancy

- Babies understand words long before they can speak them
 - **Receptive communication:** Ability to understand language
 - It is unknown exactly when babies begin to understand language, so experts recommend talking to infants from birth
- **Productive communication:** Behavior to convey messages to others
 - Includes crying, gestures, noises, and speaking
- Sounds produced by newborns are similar across languages
 - By 6 to 8 months, infants begin focusing only on the sounds in their own language

Language Development in Infancy

- **3 months:** Cooing begins (“ooh, aah”)
- **6-7 months:** Babbling, consists of repeated consonant-vowel combinations
 - Playing with language is a way of practicing the motor skills needed for speaking
- **9 months:** 1) Understand about 20-30 words
 - 2) Use gestures to communicate
- **8-18 months:** 1) Speak first word
 - 2) Respond to simple verbal requests

Language Development in Infancy: Implications

- The most important factor in an infant’s language development is the amount of language that infant is exposed to
 - Talk to infants
 - Sing to infants
 - Read to infants
 - *National Centre for Education in Maternal and Child Health* recommends beginning to read to children at 2 months old
- Respond warmly to infants’ attempts at language



Toddler Language Development

- **12 months:** Speaks 2-3 words (Vocabulary)
- **18 months:** Combines two words into sentences
- **18-24 months:** Word spurt, when children’s vocabulary begins to increase by about one word per day
- **24 months:** 1) 50-word vocabulary
 - 2) Speaks sentences with 2 to 4 words
- **36 months:** 1) 200 word vocabulary
 - 2) Speaks in sentences with 3 or 4 words
 - 3) Talks well enough for strangers to understand

Early Childhood Language Development

- **Word Spurt:** 2 year olds know about 50 words. By 6 years, children know 10,000 words
 - Young children learn about 5-7 words every day
- Young children learn vocabulary so quickly and accurately that some experts believe children have an innate capacity for learning vocabulary
 - NOTE: Young children do NOT learn this many words each day by direct instruction in the definition of vocabulary words

Early Childhood Language Development

- Begin to learn grammar
 - **2 years:** *Want biscuit.*
 - **3 years:** *I want biscuit.*
 - **4 years:** *Can I have a biscuit?*
- By 5 years, children have mastered most of the grammar in their language.
 - However, a child's grammatical learning is only as good as the grammar they hear in their environment.

Early Childhood Language Development

- Young children make many errors as they perfect their language skills
- **Overgeneralization:** Applying a meaning or rule too broadly
 - Vocabulary Overgeneralization Examples
 - *Goat* refers to all furry four-legged animals
 - *Car* refers to all motor vehicles
 - Grammar Overgeneralization Examples
 - *I have two foots.*
 - *I holded a ball.*

Middle Childhood Language Development

- Understanding of words is refined
- Pupils learn from 4,000 to 6,000 new vocabulary words each *year*
 - An average adult vocabulary is about 40,000 words
- Pupils may learn up to 20 new words each day
 - Written language uses a broader vocabulary than oral language, so reading contributes considerably to vocabulary acquisition in middle childhood
 - 21 minutes of reading per day exposes children to almost 2 million words per year

Vocabulary Acquisition

Hart, B., & Risley, R. T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Size of Vocabulary at 4 Years	
Children from Impoverished Homes	500 words
Children from Lower Middle SES	700 words
Children from Upper Middle SES	1,100 words

Vocabulary Acquisition

Hart, B., & Risley, R. T. (1995). *Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Family Status	Words heard per hour	Words heard in a 100-hour week	Words heard in a 5,200 hour year	Words heard in 4 years
Impoverished	616	62,000	3 million	13 million
Lower SES	1,251	125,000	6 million	26 million
Middle SES	2,153	215,000	11 million	45 million

Vocabulary Acquisition

- Children learn the meanings of most words indirectly, through everyday experiences with oral and written language
 - Children talk and listen in everyday conversations
 - Children are given gentle feedback by parents and older siblings when they make mistakes in pronunciation, word use, grammar, etc.
 - Explaining, not just correcting, leads to better language development
 - “That is not a dog. See, it has long curly horns. It is a ram.”

Vocabulary Acquisition

- Both indirect and direct instruction is helpful for vocabulary acquisition
 - **Indirect Instruction:** Creating a language rich environment where children have many opportunities to participate in conversations
 - **Direct Instruction:** Best for more complex words that are not part of everyday experiences
 - Direct instruction has two parts:
 - Instruction in word meanings
 - Teaching word-learning strategies

Language Development amongst Multi-Lingual Children

- Young children acquire new words from both languages
 - The number of words per language depends on how much they hear in each language
- It may **APPEAR** that children exposed to multiple languages have delays in language development
 - The size of the vocabulary measured only in one language will likely be less for multi-lingual children
 - However, when vocabulary size is combined across languages, there is no difference between mono-lingual and multi-lingual children
 - Experiencing diverse languages in early childhood is a healthy and positive experience for fostering communication and language competence
 - “In fact, children of bilingual homes might be somewhat advanced in both verbal and nonverbal intelligence” (Trawick-Smith, 2014, p. 172)

Implications for Fostering Language Development

- Children develop oral language skills through everyday experiences in a rich language environment
- Strategies for Creating a Rich Language Environment
 - Discussions
 - Ask children what they did each day
 - Discuss pictures
 - Expand on what children say
 - Storytelling: Both telling children and helping children tell stories
 - Dramatic play
 - Shared reading
 - Word plays and rhymes
 - Sing songs