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# Ways to maximize children's speech development

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**A**s a pediatrician and mom, I realize how important it is to give our children the tools to maximize their speech development. From the moment a baby comes into this world, they can comprehend and produce language. The early stage of language may be a cry to let us know they are hungry, wet or just tired. When parents respond to a baby's cries and sounds, they begin to notice the relationship between vocalization and getting their needs met. This encourages communication.

Infants' brains continue to develop as does their ability to comprehend and produce language. Language is learned by taking in information and processing the meaning behind sights and sounds. Babies begin to mimic the sounds of other people as early as four months.

The more babies are exposed to language, the more opportunities they have to develop communication. **Talk to your baby frequently. Make eye contact. Use clear adult sentences. Facial expressions and hand gestures as well as pointing to objects with a description is a great brain building tool. Incorporate conversation throughout your day with your baby.** Describe what you are doing while keeping eye contact. There are many opportunities to converse with your baby, such as bath time, while changing their diaper, feeding time or while doing daily chores and activities.

Reading daily to young children, starting in infancy, can help with language acquisition, communication skills, social skills and literacy skills. This is because reading to children in the earliest months stimulates the part of the brain that allows them to understand the

meaning of language. It also allows children to grow their vocabulary skills with exposure to new words, and develops listening skills.

I recommend choosing books with bright, colorful pictures to stimulate interest. Describe pictures, act out animal sounds and emphasize rhyming words. Make it interactive and exciting. **As the child gets older, incorporate other activities such as asking them questions like "what do you think will happen next?"**

Create opportunities to encourage children to practice communication to assist in their development:

- Acknowledge when they are babbling or making sounds.
- Put items slightly out of reach and wait for them to ask for the item in some way.
- When your baby is forming a word, elaborate on the word. Example: "dada." Respond with, "yes, dada loves you very much."
- Repeat their words to demonstrate you are listening and understand. Example: "milk." Respond with, "would you like some milk?"
- Engagement empowers children to try new words and to communicate in new ways. Try to respond quickly to all attempts of communication.
- Talk to your baby about a family picture. Create a story. Describe what is happening. Point and say the names of family members.
- Help your child understand concepts such as up and down, right and left, first and last.

**Talk to your pediatrician at each visit to make sure your baby or child is meeting their speech and communication developmental milestones.** This way, if there are any concerns, they can be addressed early on and a plan of care can be developed.

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