



Sandpaper Letters

Sensitive Periods: Language Development is Critical

From birth to six, children are in a critical period of language development, when the spoken word develops naturally. Ninety percent of our adult conversational language is in place by the age of six. If a child does not speak by age six, it is improbable that the child will acquire spoken, written or sign language beyond a two-year-old's comprehension level.

We don't have to teach children to walk or talk. Children thrive in an environment that encourages walking and talking during this critical stage of development. In normal development, a child will say his first word around twelve months and by thirty months will talk in sentences. When you are aware of your child's built-in developmental abilities, you can be of invaluable assistance by making sure your child's surroundings meet his developmental needs.

By thirty months of age, language is fully developed in the child. By thirty-six months, a child should be able to clearly speak in full sentences, with correct basic syntax (meaning words are spoken in meaningful order), and each sound in a word should be clear and intelligible.

Unfortunately, for many children this is not the case. Ear infections, a long illness, separation from parents, physical or environmental challenges can cause language delays. Luckily, the critical period for language acquisition continues for another three years. At thirty-six months analyze your child's spoken language for areas that are weak and not fully developed. Once you recognize areas for language development, you can begin to enrich your child's learning in purposeful ways.

If you see speech difficulties, make sure that your child has no physical problems receiving or communicating information. Your pediatrician should be able to help you determine if vision, hearing, or muscle tone in the mouth and tongue are affecting language development.

After addressing any physical challenges, you can begin to enrich your child's language environment and target specific skills. Some of the most common language challenges that young children have are not pronouncing certain sounds clearly; mispronouncing words, such as *pasgetti* for spaghetti; using a sentence structure that omits certain parts of speech; or substituting a word like "thingy" or grunting when they don't know a word.

If your child is having difficulty making certain sounds, singing a simple song, using just one word over and over again is a good exercise. For example, if your child cannot say the "th" sound, sing "thank you" over and over again to the tune of "London Bridge is Falling Down". Sing the word "with" to work on the ending sound, and the word "without" for internal sound practice. Make it fun and silly and in a few days you will begin to see an improvement in your child's "th" sounds. If your child needs work with multiple sounds, concentrate on one at a time, adding one new sound per week while reviewing the previous ones.

To help with mispronounced words, be sure that everyone (siblings, grandparents, caregivers) speaks to your child using normal clear speech and does not use "baby talk". Some children's mispronounced words are cute and funny, but don't

incorporate them into your speech. One of my difficult words to pronounce growing up was "yellow". My four younger siblings naturally mimicked my speech, and thought that the correct pronunciation for the color of the sun was "lellow". With my mother's patient efforts, we learned to pronounce it correctly. If she only had nickel for every time she had to say 'yellow'. Remember to use the correct word and no "baby-talk". If it doesn't sound cute on a thirty-year-old, don't let it be cute on a three-year-old.

Omitting pronouns and prepositions is another language challenge. If your child is saying things like "Me go play," kindly restate the sentence as "Yes, you are going to play outside." There is no need to force a child to repeat words or sentences after you. If your child sees and hears it the right way, he or she will soon be speaking it correctly.

If you hear your child stumbling on finding the right word, do vocabulary enrichment using cards and simple naming of items in your home. Restate sentences with an appropriate word; "That handle thingy is called an umbrella." Reading out loud to your child every day will also help strengthen vocabulary along with listening skills.

To aid in your child's language development, be aware of how children naturally develop speech. Analyze your child's speaking skills at age three, focusing on enunciation, pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary skills. Keep language rich in your home and target specific skills. Then relax a little and let your child's natural ability to create language get to work.