

Learning Disabilities and Early Intervention

According to Arlene Eisenberg, Heidi E. Murkoff and Sandee E. Hathaway, B.S.N., the authors of *What to Expect the Toddler Years*, the rate of language development can vary greatly from toddler to toddler. Some speak as early as eight months, some as late as two years.

Studies have shown that earlier speech is not an indicator of higher intelligence. In fact, toddlers who begin talking later in life may have an easier time with larger words, phrases, and sentences, due to their greater physical development, since much of speech progression is due to control of the muscles in the mouth and throat.

Later language development isn't necessarily a cause for alarm. Some toddlers simply display a greater interest in another aspect of their development-such as their physical abilities-which doesn't leave them with much time or energy for other pursuits.

However, if your toddler doesn't seem to understand or respond to your speech, you might want to talk to his or her pediatrician about your concerns. The pediatrician will probably suggest getting your child's hearing tested. Once that has been ruled out, your toddler may be sent to meet with a speech pathologist. If there's a problem, your child will begin speech therapy. The sooner a learning disability is identified, the better, since it can be dealt with effectively and have less of an impact on your toddler's self-esteem.

In the meantime, there are lots of things that you can do as a parent to facilitate your child's language development. Some simple things that you can easily incorporate into your everyday life include:

1. Talking to your child

This may sound obvious, but it's something that's rather easy to forget to do, especially if your child hasn't started speaking yet. It may take some time for you to not feel silly when you're doing this, but it will definitely be worth it in the long run. Talk to your toddler about everything-what you're doing, what he or she is doing, where the two of you are going, etc.-using simple language and clear pronunciation. Keep a running commentary going and your child is sure to pick up on the words you use most often and eventually, their meanings as well.

2. Reading to your child

Regularly reading out loud to your toddler is extremely valuable to helping develop his or her language skills. Even if your child doesn't sit down and listen, keep on reading. Using different voices for each character and sound effects to illustrate actions may help to maintain your toddler's interest. You might also want to try giving your child a toy to play with or book of their own to flip through while you read to them. Once they get used to being read to, they may develop favorites. While it may not exactly be exciting for you to read the same story again and again, the repetition will help your toddler to build their vocabulary over time.

3. Singing to your child

Once again, you may have to work on your level of embarrassment, but you really shouldn't worry too much. Children usually respond with great interest to music, and they're not too particular about whether the person singing to them has perfect pitch or not. Nursery rhyme songs with accompanying hand motions-such as "The Incy Wincy Spider" and "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star"-have the added plus of being interactive. These additional memory cues will help to encourage your toddler's language skills.

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About the Author

Jane Saeman runs an In-Home Tutoring Service called Aim High Tutors. Find out how to help your student reach their full potential at <http://www.aimhightutors.com> and <http://www.aimhightutors.com/blog>