What are the skills that lead to language?

By Elizabeth Heubeck

There's nothing quite like hearing your baby utter "Mama" or "Dada" for the first time. These words, which very often are the first that parents hear from their baby's mouth, mark the beginning of what we adults consider “real” language. But the seeds of communication start long before babies say their first intelligible word.

In fact, babies begin building communication skills as soon as they're born, explains Olga Polites, director of Clinical Services at Baltimore's Hearing and Speech Agency. She offers a general timeline of when these precursor skills to speech develop, as well as ways that parents can encourage them.

Birth to 6 Months
Infants learn very early on in life the power of communication, explains Polites. In the first few months, babies figure out that when they make a sound, they get a reaction. In simpler terms, a baby cries, and normally those cries are answered by a responsive adult fairly quickly. In addition to the urgent form of communication that is crying, vocal play also emerges in the first few months of life. This usually entails vowel-like sounds, followed by the sounds of “m,” “p,” and “d,” which, according to Polites, are easiest to imitate.

Over the next few months, babies’ crying “matures,” if you will.

According to Polites, they learn to vary the tone of their voice, allowing them to express different feelings. Subsequently, discerning parents often begin to learn the difference between a cry that signals mild discomfort—such as hunger, fatigue, or boredom—and more serious distress, such as the pain from a new tooth breaking through a baby’s gum.

As crying becomes more sophisticated, so too does vocal play. Parents may notice their babies making the silly sound often called raspberries, involving vibrating lips and a lot of superfluous spit. “These noises are very much reinforced by parents,” Polites says.

Ages 6 to 9 Months
During this period comes more experimentation with vocal play. Babies will often begin to babble, repeating a single syllable in one breath such as “bbbbbbb.”

“It doesn’t have a lot of meaning,” says Polites. “It’s just play.”

As the muscles of their mouths strengthen, babies realize they are able to make these fun sounds. The more encouragement they receive—from older kids and adults who laugh and mimic the babbling—the more confident they get in their babbling, and the more they’re likely to experiment.
**Ages 9 to 12 Months**
During this time, babies typically attempt to imitate words.

Polites says, “They babble longer strings of sound that soon become words.”

While the first word that comes tumbling out of the mouth of a baby is often (to parents’ great delight) “Mama” or “Dada,” Polites says it has nothing to do with the infant’s ability to accurately identify his or her caregivers. Rather, she explains, the “d” and the “m” happen to be sounds that are fairly easy for these new talkers to make.

But this advanced vocal play soon takes on new meaning, as babies make a connection between their calls of “Mama” and the appearance of their mother. When you break down the multiple steps that occur before the first words come out of a baby’s mouth, it becomes evident that the development of language does not simply happen overnight. And just as an infant must build up to this exciting milestone, parents can do their part to encourage the arrival and continuation of speech. “Talk to your child,” Polites says. “It needs to be almost an obsession. The more language they hear, the more they’re comfortable with it, and the more they learn.”

**Tips for Talking to Babies So They’ll Talk Back**
Olga Polites, director of Clinical Services at Baltimore's Hearing and Speech Agency, offers the following suggestions:

- Talk to babies about everything, such as what you see around you and what you hear.
- Use language that’s appropriate and not too elevated.
- Read to your child early and often.

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