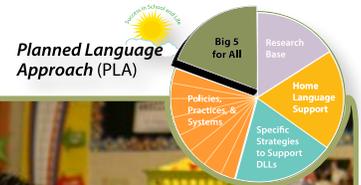


How Caregivers and Teachers Support Oral Language and Vocabulary

STRATEGIES



Introduction

Oral language refers to all aspects of spoken language, including children’s growing and diverse vocabularies of new and varied words. When children have strong language models, they develop strong language skills. Dual language learners develop early language and vocabulary skills in two (or more) languages.

Children show that they are developing oral language when they:

- Communicate their needs through crying or smiling
- Babble and coo
- Say their first words
- Learn and use new vocabulary
- Use phrases, sentences, and stories that become more complex over time

Talking to children supports both receptive (hearing and understanding languages) and expressive (making and using their language knowledge) language skills. It is well documented that when caregivers and teachers provide young children with rich language experiences in any language, children are more likely to learn to read and comprehend grade-level texts in the early and later grades (Lonigan, Schatschneider, & Westberg, 2008; NICHD-ECCRN, 2005).

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Supporting babies to develop Oral Language and Vocabulary

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Caregivers and teachers support babies' oral language development by talking to them—even before they are born! When adults give even the youngest babies opportunities to participate in "conversations," they are helping children become eager and able talkers—first as they babble and coo and later as they speak their first words.



Babies begin to develop Oral Language and Vocabulary when caregivers and teachers:

- ▶ Are responsive to babies' needs for feeding, changing, comforting, and cuddling (Silven, Niemi, & Voeten, 2002)
- ▶ Use child-directed speech or "parentese," which means speaking in a higher pitch, at a slower rate, with clearer enunciation, and in simpler and shorter phrases, combined with gestures and facial expressions (Snow, 1991)
- ▶ Talk, read, and sing to babies in one or more languages (Hoff et al., 2012)
- ▶ Engage babies in "conversations" by responding with different facial expressions, gestures, and/or words each time a baby babbles and coos (Fernald & Weisleder, 2011)
- ▶ Talk to babies about what they see, hear, and smell wherever they go (Murray & Yingling, 2000)
- ▶ Explain routines, such as getting dressed, meal time, bathing, or swaddling (Strickland & Riley-Ayers, 2006; Silven, Niemi, & Voeten, 2002; Weizman & Snow, 2001)
- ▶ Use gestures, such as pointing, to direct children's attention to objects or people of interest (e.g., "Look! See the squirrel.") (Harris, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-Pasek, 2011)
- ▶ Teach them simple signs or gestures to help them communicate such basic messages as "eat," "drink," "up," "all done" (Thompson, Cotnoir-Bichelman, McKerchar, Tate, & Dancho, 2013)
- ▶ Share books with brightly colored illustrations or photos; label and describe the pictures (Hoffman & Cassano, 2013)



Some ways caregivers and teachers support babies' Oral Language and Vocabulary

STRATEGIES

At the Early Head Start Center

Lucinda is changing a baby's diaper when she asks, "Should we throw away this dirty diaper?" At the sound of Lucinda's voice the baby responds, "Ba-ba-ba-ba." "Ba-ba-ba," Lucinda echoes, "I agree! We should get rid of this icky, stinky diaper!" Lucinda drops the diaper into a nearby trash can. "All gone! Now here is a clean new diaper just for you." As the baby continues to babble and coo, Lucinda responds, "You are welcome!"

On a Home Visit

Anna, a home visitor, talks with Melanie, the mother of 4-year-old José and 6-month-old Soledad, about why it is so important for parents to talk to their children. "The more you talk to them, the more words they will learn!" Although Melanie now understands how important it is to talk to her children in Spanish at home, she is not sure what to talk about—especially with Soledad. "Talk about what you are doing," Anna explains, "getting dressed, having a bath, making dinner. When she babbles, respond like she said something interesting—nod, smile, and talk to her. You can also talk about the things you see." Anna continues and says, "Point to something and say, 'Look! There goes the mail truck. It is delivering letters and packages.' This will help Soledad *and* José learn new words." Anna also shares how important it is for José and Soledad's father to also talk to Soledad so that she learns from all family members.

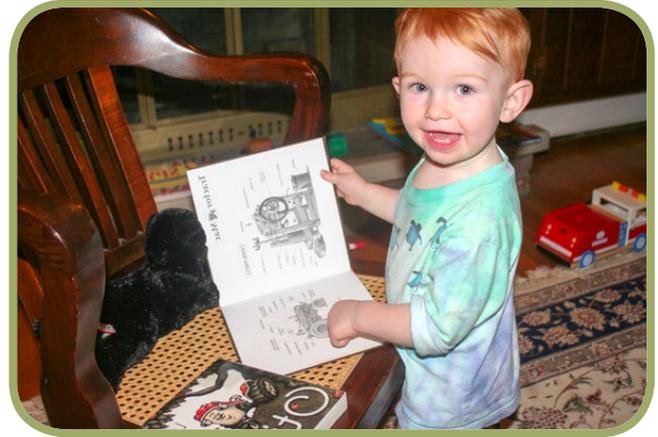


Supporting toddlers to develop Oral Language and Vocabulary

STRATEGIES

The number of words children know and understand expands rapidly from 18 months to 3 years. Toddlers are also developing oral language when they begin to speak in simple sentences and say such things as “go bye-bye,” “all done,” and “mommy home.”

Not all toddlers develop oral language in the same way. Some show slow, steady growth, while others progress in spurts (sudden increases) in the number of words they know. Toddlers *learn the words in the languages that they hear*. So it is important that they hear lots of language(s) during this exciting period of development.



Toddlers develop Oral Language and Vocabulary when caregivers and teachers:

- ▶ Talk to toddlers frequently using different and interesting words (Huttenlocher, Waterfall, Vasilyeva, Vevea, & Hedges, 2010; Hoff & Naigles, 2002; Collins, 2012; Pan, Rowe, Singer, & Snow, 2005)
- ▶ Have one-on-one conversations every day (Wells, 1985) and aim for five conversational turns for each speaker (Dickinson, 2011)
- ▶ Intentionally teach words and word meanings (e.g., “The sign says ‘Caution.’ So we need to be careful.”) (Collins, 2010; Elley, 1989) and repeat these new words over time to increase toddlers’ understanding of them (e.g., “That yellow light means caution—just like the sign we saw. Cars need to be careful!”) (Carey, 1978)
- ▶ Answer children’s questions, particularly those about why and how the world works (e.g., “The sun is setting—going down. That’s why it is getting dark outside.”) (Beals, 1997; Tabors, Beals, & Weizman, 2001)
- ▶ Build on what children say (e.g., “Yes. That is an airplane. The airplane is flying across the sky.”) (Barnes, Gutfreund, Satterly, & Wells, 1983)
- ▶ Model how to use language correctly; for example, if the child says, “Bear goed to sleep,” respond with, “Oh, your bear went to sleep? Good night bear!”
Note: do not ask children to repeat the phrase correctly (Stechuk & Burns, 2005).
- ▶ Ask questions that help toddlers provide explanations (e.g., “How did you get those blocks to stand up?”), descriptions (e.g., “What does it look like?”), or observations (“What is your sissy doing?”) (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001)
- ▶ Read (and re-read) books written just for them, including books that encourage singing or clapping (i.e., participation books), books that teach new ideas (i.e., concept books), and books that tell a good story, especially picture storybooks (Hoffman & Cassano, 2013)
- ▶ Encourage imaginary play and introduce words not used in everyday experiences (e.g., “Let’s blast off to the moon? Get ready for the countdown . . . 5, 4, 3, 2, 1 . . . Blast off!”)

On a Home Visit

Jay, a two-year-old, is cooking banana bread with his mom and a home visitor, Stefanie. "Jay, first we have to mash the bananas. Watch!" Stefanie says as she presses a fork into the bananas "See how I am mashing them? Here. You try!" After Jay helps to mash the bananas, Stefanie says, "Now we have to stir the bananas into the batter—the mix we made. Remember how we stir, stir, stirred the sugar and the flour together? Stir the bananas into the batter." As Stefanie continues to help Jay make banana bread, his mother notices that even routine tasks like cooking provide lots of new and interesting words for Jay to learn.

At the Early Head Start Center

Elena is getting ready to sing "Old MacDonald Had a Farm" with a small group of toddlers. Before she does, she engages the children in a short discussion about farm animals to help them make connections between the song and books they have read about farm animals. She begins by holding up a small, stuffed pig. "Sara. What animal is this?" "Piggie!" Sara answers. Elena nods and says, "Yes. It is a pig! What do you know about pigs?" she asks the group. "P.U." one toddler says, pinching his nose. "All dirty," says another. "That's right! Pigs like mud and they can get a bit stinky. Do we remember what sound they make?" The toddlers "oink" enthusiastically while Elena reaches for another stuffed animal. "What can you tell me about this farm animal?" she asks.

At the Early Head Start Center

Zoe, an Early Head Start teacher, walks 18-month-old Tommy out to the playground. Her goal is to engage him in an extended, one-on-one conversation. "Look!" she says, pointing to the garden. "Our plants are growing." They walk over to the small garden the children planted. "See the stems poking through the dirt? Soon there will be leaves and flowers!" Tommy points to the stems and says, "Look! Flower!" "Yes, that's right!"

Zoe says, "The stems will grow leaves and flowers." Tommy asks, "Boo flowers?" Zoe smiles, "You like blue, don't you? I'm not sure that there will be blue flowers, but there might be purple and yellow flowers." Tommy points again and says, "Rock!" "Yes," Zoe agrees. "There are rocks around our garden. Let's see if we can find the one you painted." As they look for the rock, Zoe notes that Tommy already knows a lot about how to participate in a conversation.



Supporting preschoolers to develop Oral Language and Vocabulary

STRATEGIES

Preschoolers are great (and sometimes tireless) conversationalists! By the age of 3, children have developed relationships, interests, and knowledge about the world that they can share with others, and they have learned to talk about these and many other aspects of their lives! Some preschoolers are “big talkers”—eager to share everything they know, while others talk less as they observe the world quietly. In each case, preschoolers provide adults with many opportunities to extend children’s preschool growth and support children to learn the meanings of many new words.



Preschoolers develop Oral Language and Vocabulary when caregivers and teachers:

- ▶ Use lots of different and interesting words to help preschoolers build their vocabularies (Hoff & Naigles, 2002; Huttenlocher, Waterfall, Vasilyeva, Vevea, & Hedges, 2010)
- ▶ Intentionally teach what new words mean—especially when the child asks (e.g., “I was concerned. That means I was worried about you when you fell down today.”) (Wasik & Bond, 2001)
- ▶ “Tuck in” definitions of new words (e.g., “That joke was hilarious. It was really, really funny!”) (Collins, 2012; Elley, 1989)
- ▶ Read books to help children learn about their cultures and traditions as well as the natural world (Schickedanz & Collins, 2013)
- ▶ Have one-on-one conversations every day, keep the conversation going by asking and answering questions (Crain-Thorenson & Dale, 1992), and aim for five conversational turns for each speaker (Dickinson, 2011)
- ▶ Help preschoolers describe past events or tell stories (e.g., “So you hit a piñata with a bat, and then what happened?”) (Dickinson & Tabors, 2001)
- ▶ Explain unfamiliar words when reading (e.g., “The pirate was ‘massive’. That means he was huge! Look how massive he is!”) (Elley, 1989; Sénéchal, Thomas, & Monker, 1995)
- ▶ Take outings frequently and talk to children about what they see, hear, and smell (e.g., “Look, at that snowplow clearing the snow!”) (Baker, Sonnenschein, Serpell, Fernandez-Fein, & Scher, 1994)
- ▶ Model appropriate language without correcting children (e.g., When a child asks for an adult to remove the “banana skin,” the adult might respond with, “Sure! I can take off the banana peel for you.”)
- ▶ Support pretend play by providing objects, such as boxes of different sizes, blocks, and dress-up clothes, and playing along (e.g., “Oh yes! I’d love to eat at your restaurant. Do you have a menu so I can see what I want to eat?”)



Some ways teachers support preschoolers' Oral Language and Vocabulary

At the Head Start Center

Mara, a preschool teacher, is sitting with a small group of 3-, 4-, and 5-year-olds during mealtime. "I am going to describe something on the table," she says. "See if you can guess what it is." As the children look at the items on the table, Mara says, "It is white." "Napkin," one child says holding up her napkin. "Could be," Mara says. "But I am thinking of something that is white *and* you drink it!" "Milk! Milk!" the children chant. "Yes. Milk," their teacher agrees. "Let's all take a sip of milk and then you can tell me how we get milk."



At the Head Start Center

Camilla, a Head Start teacher, observes Valentina and Luz as they play with the classroom doll house. "Goo goo! Gaa gaa. I'm the baby!" Valentina says. "Okay," says Luz. "I'm the mommy. Let's go to bed baby!" Valentina makes crying noises and says, "Put the baby to bed, on the upper case." Luz looks confused, so Camilla intervenes. "Valentina," she says, "do you mean upstairs?" She points to the upper level of the house. "This is the upstairs and this is the downstairs," she adds. As the girls resume their play, Camilla makes a note to use the words upstairs and downstairs in future conversations. She also reflects on how she can build on Valentina's understanding of the word "upper."

At the Head Start Center

Nikki, the Head Start teacher, is reading a book about animals. "This part of the book is about oviparous animals. I had to look that word up. 'Oviparous' means animals that lay eggs." She then asks the children to tell her what animals they might see in this part of the book. The children call out, "A bird! A frog! A whale!" Nikki says, "Well, yes. Birds lay eggs, and so do frogs. But a whale is a mammal. Mammals' babies develop inside the mother. The mammal mother does not lay eggs, so they are not oviparous." Eli adds, "My sister's favorite animal is a platypus. Is a platypus ovi—ovi . . ." his voice trails off. "Is it oviparous?" Nikki asks. "Well, yes it is. And a platypus *is* a mammal, too. What else do you know about the platypus?" After Eli tells them what he knows, Nikki returns to the book. As she reads, she notices that Eli is smiling. He is excited to share his new knowledge—and his new word—with his sister.

Resources for Oral Language and Vocabulary

STRATEGIES

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Resources for Oral Language and Vocabulary

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