

Brain development and the mastery of language

AS A PARENT OF A YOUNG CHILD, YOU PROBABLY watch with great anticipation as your child meets developmental milestones. Of all the areas of development, language seems to be the one parents focus on. Most parents are charmed by those early coos and giggles and record first words and early sentences.

THE BRAIN IS PRIMED TO DEVELOP LANGUAGE

Language is our most powerful means of interacting with one another, and children begin the process of developing language naturally. Neurobiologist Dr. Lise Eliot writes that “the reason language is instinctive is because it is, to a large extent, hard-wired in the brain. Just as we evolve neural circuits for eating and seeing, so has our brain ... evolved a complex neural circuit for rapidly perceiving, analyzing, composing, and producing language.”

We also know, however, that the experiences you provide in your child’s environment are critical for the development of language. It is this interplay of the biological plan and the loving nurture you give that results in your child’s ability to communicate. Brain development information simply reinforces much of what early childhood experts have been suggesting for years: ***the development of language is tremendously influenced by the day-to-day positive interactions you have with your child.***

LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT THROUGHOUT THE EARLY YEARS

Researchers tell us that a baby is able to respond to sound 10 weeks before birth. He learns his mother’s voice and the sound of the language she speaks even before he is born. A lullaby can be very calming, especially if dad or mom sang to the baby during pregnancy.

While a newborn doesn’t use words, he is definitely able to communicate. He can look into his father’s or mother’s face in a way that tells them he wants to hear their voices. By crying he is able to let them know his needs. When you meet your baby’s needs when he cries you are showing him that his communication is effective.



During the first year talk, sing, and read to your baby often so he can learn the sounds of language. By imitating your child’s sounds, you encourage taking turns in conversation. As your child becomes a toddler, the brain organizes the connections for language when your child sees pictures in a book and hears you give names for the pictures at the same time.

Between 24 and 35 months of age your child’s brain becomes better at forming mental symbols for objects, people, and events. This is directly related to his growing ability to use many more words and short sentences. Children this age are beginning to understand the power of language.

Preschoolers are usually real talkers! They make up stories and become fascinated with rhyming words. Songs, rhymes, and fingerplays help your child hear different speech sounds. This forms the foundation for connecting sounds to letter shapes, and later to learning to read. ❖