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# Tips for parents – from research to everyday life

#2 How can we support babies in their language development?



The development of language begins even before birth. Already hearing their mother's voice in the womb, babies get used to the speech melody of their mother tongue<sup>1)</sup>. Until babies can use their own first words or even sentences, it is a long way to go. Around the first birthday, most babies say their first word and around the age of two, they start forming first simple sentences of two words (e.g. "drink juice"). Most children seem to achieve these milestones in language development effortlessly. However, some findings from current research are useful for parents to support this important learning process:

### Babies need live linguistic input!

Babies need to hear a lot of speech before they can start talking themselves. However, it makes a significant difference if they are simply listening to a tape or video, or if a person is speaking to them directly. One study showed that babies only learnt to distinguish between different sounds of a foreign language when they were interacting directly with a person. When hearing the same linguistic input via video or tape, it did not produce the same learning output<sup>2)</sup>.

**Why is that?** Social interactions play a big role for learning in early childhood<sup>3)</sup>. First of all, babies are more attentive and probably more motivated when a person engages with them and they listen more intensely as compared to just listening to a video that is played for them. Moreover, direct interaction is necessary to build a relationship, which supports social learning even stronger.

### Babies need feedback!

For early language development, it is not only important for babies to hear a lot of speech. It is also crucial that parents react to the baby's attempts to talk. The so-called "babbling" is an important excursion for little ones. When mothers were asked in a study to consistently respond to their baby's babbling, e.g. with a smile, the children made faster progress in their language development<sup>4)</sup>.

**Why is that?** Babies need to practice to talk a lot in order to be able to correctly pronounce syllables and finally also words. Babies notice when their caregivers respond to their linguistic exercises and are most likely motivated to keep on trying. They realize that they can make a difference in the world with their speech, even if it is "only" the proud smile of their mom or dad.

### Baby Talk helps babies to learn!

Parents often intuitively react to their baby's babbling sounds with simple "motherese" language or "baby talk" and thereby support the language development of their child<sup>5)</sup>.

**Why is that?** Baby talk is particularly melodic, contains longer pauses and is characterised by strong emphasis on single words. This has been shown to help babies to structure language and to identify individual words and eventually learn them<sup>6)</sup>.

Find out more at:

[www.kinderstudien.at](http://www.kinderstudien.at)

<sup>1)</sup> Mampe, B., et al., *Curr Biol*, 2009. 19(23): p. 1994-7.

<sup>2)</sup> Kuhl, P.K., *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science U S A*, 2003. 100(17): p. 9645-6.

<sup>3)</sup> Csibra, G. and G. Gergely, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 2009. 13(4): p. 148-53.

<sup>4)</sup> Goldstein, M.H., A.P. King, and M.J. West, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Science U S A*, 2003. 100(13): p. 8030-5.

<sup>5)</sup> Elmlinger, S.L., J.A. Schwade, and M.H. Goldstein, *J Child Lang*, 2019: p. 1-14.

<sup>6)</sup> Thiessen, E.D., E.A. Hill, and J.R. Saffran, *Infancy*, 2005. 7(1): p. 53-71.

