



## Mind Over Media: Developing good language skills

The remarkable achievement of language development in the first few years of children's lives, requires them to learn speech sounds, meanings, grammar and everyday use. All being well, babies are born with a natural ability and inclination to learn language, and to do this their cognitive ability must combine with actions of imitation, experience and reinforcement. The role of carers is vital in supporting preschoolers through this exciting and complex process.

### Language development and the media

Children develop language skills by listening to and interacting with their carers, participating in songs and rhymes, experimenting with sounds, trying out words that name and describe things, and using action words to get what they want. The cycle of interaction includes ongoing feedback from their carers about the words they are using and the sense they are making. It is important to remember that language development, like all other areas of development, occurs at different rates for different children. The milestones below are given as a guide only and could vary quite a bit from child to child.

Although some television programs have been shown to support language development, they are few. The primary means by which children will become effective communicators is through their relationships and interactions with others. Some experts have theorised that private vocalisations during early play are important for developing language, and that this may be disrupted by having a television on in the background while the very young child is playing. Heavy television viewing and viewing of adult programs can also be associated with poorer language development.

### Infants (0-1 years)

The most important developmental need of an infant is secure attachment to their primary caregivers. (See YMA's Fact Sheet *Mind Over Media: Developing Healthy Relationships* for more detail on this topic.) By approximately three months of age, infants start "conversational turn-taking" (Berk 2003, p351), that is coo-ing, waiting for the caregiver's response, then coo-ing again. 'Babbling' begins at around six months. As infants approach 12 months, turn-taking becomes more complicated, and with the introduction of games such as pat-a-cake and peekaboo, babbling starts to resemble human speech patterns, and they will most likely be using gestures to further communicate with their caregivers.

### Infants, the media and language development

The development of language in infancy can not be assisted by television or computers, but requires interaction with a responsive human caregiver, and exposure to human speech. The message of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) "The first two years of life are especially important in the growth and development of your child's brain. During this time, children need good, positive interaction with other children and adults to develop good language and social skills. Learning to talk and play with others is far more important than watching television" (AAP, 1999).

*Here are a few strategies that will help:*

- Minimise exposure to electronic media for children under the age of two.
- If you do wish to use the television to 'entertain' your infant, choose programs with very simple language such as *Teletubbies* or *Play School* and watch them with your infant, repeating words and pointing to similar objects in real life.
- Use these programs to give you ideas for word games you can play with your infant at a later stage.
- Be responsive to your infant's message that they have had enough, for example, if they turn away or fuss.

### Toddlers (1-3 years)

Toddlers expand their vocabulary considerably, picking up new words and their meanings very quickly by 'fast-mapping', connecting words with an underlying concept very quickly. They start putting words together in a meaningful way "Daddy car", "dog gone". Toddlers will be encouraged in their first attempts at words and meanings by the reactions of their primary caregivers. Most parents, although untrained in language acquisition, will naturally paraphrase, label, clarify, praise, and model correct grammar and pronunciation, thereby supporting their toddler's language development.

### Toddlers, the media and language development

In 2003, the National Literacy Trust commissioned Dr Robin Close to review the published research on the relationship between television viewing in the early years and language and literacy development (Close, 2004). The research shows that given the right conditions [see p.2], good quality



educational television may assist children between the ages of two and five develop some language skills (attention and comprehension, receptive vocabulary, some expressive knowledge, letter-sound knowledge, knowledge of narrative and storytelling). In areas such as grammar, phonological awareness, knowledge of literacy, no correlation to improved skills has been established.

Children who were heavy television viewers were found to have lower expressive language scores. Children who were frequently exposed to programming aimed at an adult audience were also found to have poor language development, including a lower vocabulary and poor expressive language.

*Here are a few strategies that will help:*

- Limit total screen time per day to one hour of quality educational viewing. Too much TV can reduce the time your toddler spends interacting with other people—human interaction is the most effective way for them to learn.
- Minimise the time that the television is on in the background while your child is playing in the same room.
- Choose programs that use child directed speech, that is addressing the child directly, clear repetitions of key words and clear links between words spoken and what is happening on the screen. Programs such as *Sesame Street*, *Play School*, *Barney and Friends* use these techniques.
- Watch these programs with your toddler and follow their lead by repeating words or sentences which have most interested them.
- When it is time to stop watching TV, comment on what they have been watching, including how much fun it seemed to be, and discuss with them what activity they would like to do next.
- Watch the *Teletubbies* with your child. Observe how your child interacts with the program and occasionally repeat the adult voiceovers for emphasis while engaging your child in the relevant action.
- Reinforce the language your toddler has been exposed to by providing real life experiences. For example, if Big Bird has been talking about flowers, walk around the garden and name the different colours or go your local Botanic Gardens to see a variety of shapes and sizes.
- Provide opportunities for play with other toddlers and for practising their blossoming language skills with other trusted adults.

## Preschoolers (3–5 years)

Older preschoolers continue to expand their vocabulary and begin to construct more complicated sentences. As their language skills improve, they start expressing more complex ideas. While they may still make mistakes with grammar, they are improving in this respect, and generally are able to make themselves understood. Parents can now respond to

the preschooler's areas of interest, including the frequent 'why' in conversation.

## Preschoolers, the media and language development

As with toddlers, screen time for preschoolers is best kept to a minimum. When they do watch television, it should be age appropriate educational television, watched with an adult caregiver.

Close concludes that factors associated with positive viewing experiences include:

- Content is age-appropriate
- Both new and familiar words used
- Offers possibilities for interaction and adult co-viewing and teaching
- Encourages participation through songs and questions
- Some repetition of content

Factors associated with negative viewing experiences include:

- Excessive visual and auditory stimuli
- Complex narratives
- Presence of older siblings during viewing
- Content is 'language-poor'
- Extensive co-viewing with adults of adult programming

*Close (2004) p.2*

To date, there is little research about the role computer software can play in language development. It is possible that good quality educational software could assist in developing some language skills such as letter and word recognition; however, this tool too is best used in moderation and with adult mediation.

*Here are a few media strategies that will help:*

- Limit total screen time per day to one hour of quality educational viewing. (For some practical tips about how to achieve this, see YMA's Fact Sheet *Mind Over Media: Developing good social and emotional skills*)
- Continue to provide opportunities for real life interactions with others.
- Keep the television out of your preschooler's bedroom. Keeping the television in a public space enables you to make the most of opportunities to reinforce and extend language learning.
- There are many educational computer programs available that are well written and appealing to children. You can get some ideas about available computer software from *The Scholastic* website ([www.scholastic.com.au](http://www.scholastic.com.au)) or The Australian Scholarships Group ([www.asg.com.au](http://www.asg.com.au)).
- When you do introduce computer games to your preschooler, set clear rules about when and how much time they can spend playing them.

## Some tips for moderating TV use

*Try these ways to keep the TV in its place!*

- Limit TV viewing. Avoid using TV as a babysitter. Provide clear rules about time limits and allowable programs. Then stick to them.
- Don't use TV to reward or punish. Treating TV as a reward or punishment only increases its attractiveness.
- Encourage child-appropriate viewing, that is viewing that supports their age and stage of development. Encourage children to watch programs that are entertaining, informative and prosocial.
- Help them understand what they see on TV. As much as possible, watch TV with your children., express disapproval of inappropriate behaviours such as violence or verbal put-downs, raise questions that will help them think about the reality of what they are seeing. Teach them to evaluate TV content rather than accept it uncritically.
- Link TV content to everyday learning. Build on TV in constructive ways, encouraging them to move away from the set into active engagement with their surroundings. For example, follow up a program on animals by a trip to the zoo or a pet shop, or go to the library to find books about animals.
- Model good viewing practices. Avoid excessive TV viewing, and violent programming, yourself. What you watch will influence what your child watches.
- Be firm and clear about your expectations. Respond to children with warmth and reasonable demands for mature behaviour. Children who are parented in this way, prefer programs with prosocial content and are less attracted to violent TV.

*Information in the section has been adapted from Berk (2003) p604*

## Brain research—the impact of stress

For some time, experience has informed us that a child's healthy development across a range of areas such as language, cognitive ability, self esteem and so on can be compromised if they are exposed to violence or trauma. Early brain research is now adding to the body of knowledge about these impacts and underscores these concerns.

Dr Bruce Perry from the Child Trauma Academy, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Texas Children's Hospital has measured startle rates, heart rates, urinary concentrations of epinephrine, norepinephrine and dopamine to measure reactions of abused and neglected patients and compare them with the norm.

*A summary of Dr Bruce Perry's findings (2000)*

- As the brain grows, more complex areas begin to control and modulate the more primitive function of the lower parts of the brain. The person becomes less reactive, less impulsive and more 'thoughtful'
- Chronic stress can increase the reactivity of the lower parts of the brain; neglect, brain injury, Alzheimer's and alcohol intoxication can decrease the moderating capacity of the more complex areas.
- Repetition is the key to the brain's capacity to organise itself, whether it be a child practising the piano, a caregiver speaking to an infant or a preschooler exposed to violence in the home.
- The more that threat-related neural systems are activated during development, the more they will be 'built in' to the brain
- These alterations may manifest as functional changes in emotional, behavioural and cognitive functioning.

*Perry (2000)*

## Conclusion

There is some evidence that some aspects of language development can be improved by exposure to good quality educational television programs in the preschool years, particularly if viewed with an adult who extends the words and concepts with play opportunities. Some computer programs may also assist with work recognition and reading readiness. However, it is best to minimise total screen time, and exposure to television programs aimed at adults. The best language teachers are responsive human caregivers.

## References

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) (1999) *Television – How It Affects Children*—[Viewed 14 September 2005] ([www.aap.org/healthtopics/mediause.cfm](http://www.aap.org/healthtopics/mediause.cfm))

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