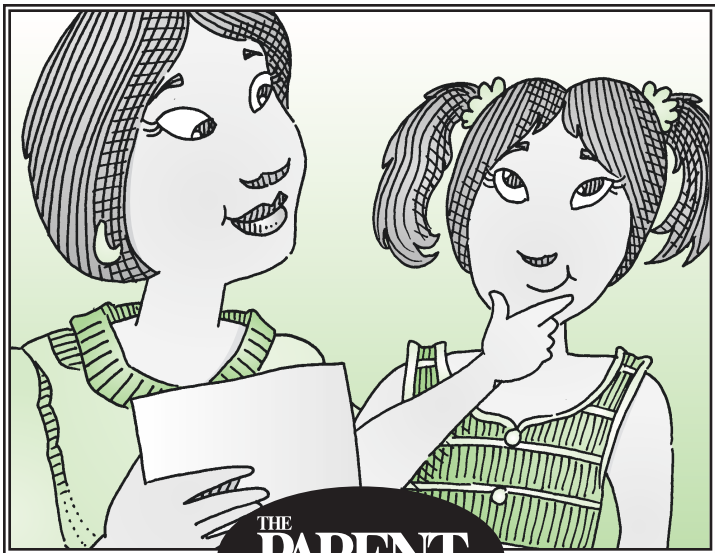


SCHOOL READINESS SERIES
FOR
PRESCHOOL
PARENTS

Learning About Language

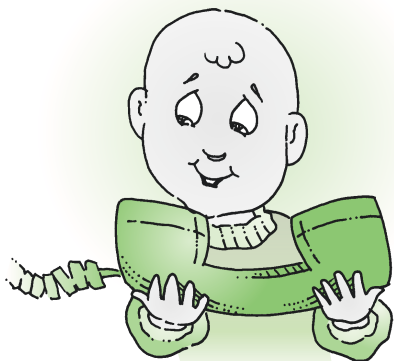


THE
PARENT
INSTITUTE®

One of a Series of Booklets for Parents

Why Is Learning About Language So Important?

Few childhood milestones are more exciting than when a baby says his* first word. Talking opens up a whole new world of possibilities for parents and children, allowing them to communicate more clearly than ever before. Talking also shows that your child has learned a lot about listening. Talking and listening are giant steps toward the other two language skills of reading and writing.



Because language helps children do so many things—from expressing themselves to understanding others—educators believe it is the *foundation* for learning. They also believe that the most important time to learn about language is before starting school, when children’s brains are developing quickly in important ways. Experts say that by working on language skills with your child, you can *permanently* improve the way his brain works!

The ideas in this booklet will help you build these skills. All of these ideas are easy to use—most simply involve talking or reading with your child. Best of all, they’re fun. By making these activities part of your daily life, you and your child will enjoy learning about language—and each other!



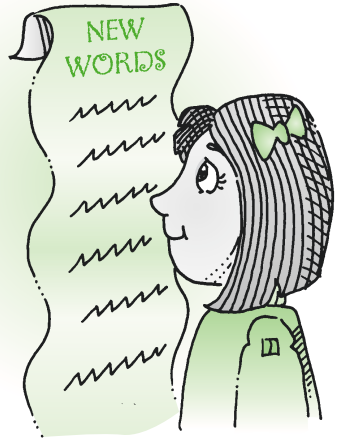
**Every child is unique, so we often use the singular pronoun.*

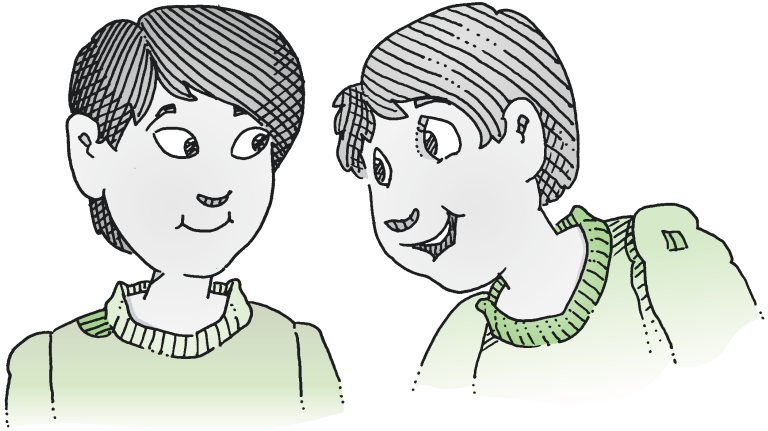
We’ll alternate using “he/him” and “she/her” throughout this booklet.

Children Learn to Talk in Stages

Before children learn to use words, they use other ways to communicate, such as crying. Often, parents can tell what their babies are “saying” just by listening to the noises they make. These early forms of expression are actually the beginnings of language development:

- **At first**, babies use their voices for crying only. But within a few weeks or months, they begin babbling or “cooing.” They start by using vowels, and then some consonants.
- **Between six and nine months**, babies usually start repeating sounds they like. Sometimes these noises sound like words, such as “mama” and “papa.”
- **At about nine months**, children purposely echo what others say. If you repeat “mama” to your nine-month-old and show joy when she imitates you, she may begin saying it on purpose.
- **At around 12 months**, children usually use at least one word—and really know what it means. They also understand several more.
- **By 18 months**, most children can say about 10 words. They may use short sentences, such as “Want cookie.”
- **Between ages two and three**, toddlers learn hundreds of new words. They use them to create longer sentences, such as “You get book and read to me.”
- **By age four**, children can hold conversations. They may also use words playfully (using bathroom language at inappropriate times).
- **Five-year-olds** know and use thousands of words. Experts say they’ve probably learned at least half of all the words they’ll ever know!





Take Time to Talk and Listen

One of the best ways to teach about language is through talking and listening. Children should have as many opportunities as possible to hear and use language.

Here's how you can help:

- **Describe your activities.** Beginning when your child is a newborn, talk to him about what you're doing. "We're at the grocery store. We're going to buy some fruit and cereal for you!"
- **Identify everything.** As you and your child see objects, name them. "There's a plane in the sky!" or "That's my nose!" You can also identify other things, such as feelings. Say, "You seem frustrated," or "I'm thirsty for some water."
- **Ask questions.** "What would you like to do today?" "Why is this your favorite book?" Try to avoid asking questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no."
- **Answer questions.** Children's questions are good conversation starters. Try answering in a way that encourages more talking. If your child asks where elephants live, you might respond, "Some elephants live in Africa. What other animals live in Africa?"

- **Experience new things.** New experiences introduce your child to new words. At the museum, he might learn the word “apatosaurus.” Or at a farm, he might learn “rooster.”



- **Speak properly.** It can be tempting to use children’s mispronunciations, such as “pasghetti.” But since your child learns from what you say, it’s better to use correct diction and grammar.
- **Rephrase.** It’s natural for children to make mistakes when they’re learning to talk. Instead of correcting your child, restate what he says. If he says, “I want my bankie,” say, “Oh. You want your blanket.”
- **Listen carefully.** Pay close attention when your child is talking—and don’t interrupt. If he knows you’re listening, he may talk more.

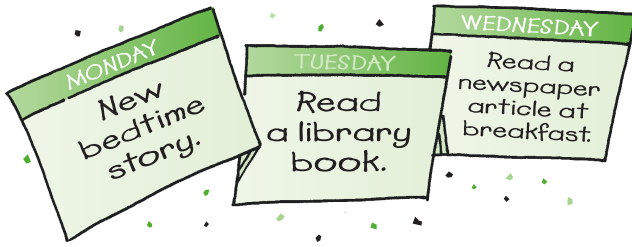
Tell Stories to Each Other

You and your child can also practice talking and listening by telling stories. Here are some ideas to get you started:

- **Re-enact books.** Choose a story your child loves and ask which character she'd like to play. Then have her act out the tale. If she'd like, family members can play supporting roles.
- **Remember.** Ask your child to tell her favorite family story. Then talk about other family adventures, such as memorable vacations or funny mishaps.
- **Tell your child a story.** Try to include characters your child cares about, such as relatives or pets. Also, remember that it's okay to use some words your child doesn't know. Hearing them in the context of the story may help her learn.



- **Tell stories together.** You can take turns adding sentences to a story. Or you can ask your child questions as you go along. For instance, "What should this character do next?"
- **Write your own book.** Make up a story with your child, and write every line or two on a blank piece of paper. Punch holes in each page and let your child add illustrations. Then bind the pages with ribbons or yarn.



Read to Your Child Every Day

Reading and language skills are closely connected. When you read with your child, you build his language skills. And when you talk with your child, you prepare him for reading.

It's important to spend at least 10 to 15 minutes a day reading with your child. During that time, try these language-building activities:

- **Discuss what you're reading.** Answer questions your child has about the book—even if they interrupt the story. And ask him questions, too. Here are some suggestions:
 - What do you think will happen next?
 - How do you think this character feels right now?
 - How do you think this story will end?
- **Let your child “read” to himself or you.** When children pretend to read, they practice important skills, such as looking at words, organizing their thoughts, and expressing themselves.
- **Read books that include rhymes.** Hearing words and sounds repeatedly helps children become comfortable with them. Many books use rhyming, including *Goodnight, Moon* and *The Gingerbread Man*.
- **Read silly stories.** Some books include words and phrases that are fun to say. Dr. Seuss books are a good example. When reading these books, occasionally stop to repeat funny phrases with your child.
- **Try using “special effects.”** Making faces and talking in different voices can make books more interesting for your child.

Letters Are Part of Language, Too!



It's important for children to understand the connection between spoken and written words. Reading helps with this, and so does learning about letters.

The best time to teach about letters is after your child shows interest in them. (She may point them out or ask questions about them.) Not all children are ready to learn about letters before they go to school. If your child is not, that's fine. But if she does show an interest, let her set the pace. Try activities that involve letter recognition and pronunciation.

- 1. Recognition.** Start by teaching your child a few letters at a time, such as her initials. Be patient—it can take up to a year to learn the whole alphabet! These ideas will help:
 - **Make letters in fun ways**, such as with paint, play dough, or glitter-covered children's glue.
 - **Look for letters everywhere**—on signs, cereal boxes and in books.
 - **Write a letter**, such as the letter "c," at the top of a piece of paper. Under it, write words that begin with that letter, such as "cat" and "carrot." Emphasize the "c" in each word. Help your child paste a picture next to each word on the page.



2. Pronunciation.

Talk about how different words and letters sound. Here are some suggestions for simple word games to play with your child:

- **Think of words** that begin with the same sound.
- **Say a word**, and have your child think of others that start with that sound.
- **Think of rhyming words**, such as “cat” and “bat.” Talk about how the *ends* of those words are the same, but the *beginning* sounds are different.
- **Say two words** that *start* with the same sounds but *end* differently—like “sit” and “sip,” for example. See if you can think of other words that sound alike at the start but are different at the end.

More Ways to Have Fun With Words

Without words, life wouldn't be much fun. Words allow us to tell jokes, spread happy news, and say "I love you." Here are some ways you and your child can enjoy words:

- **Play word games.** For example, say a word and have your child think of its opposite. (*Up/down, under/over, right/left, push/pull.*) Or when reading a book, pause and let your child guess which word comes next.
- **Use props.** Add word-related items to your child's playthings. For instance, a telephone book near a play telephone. Or a cookbook in a pretend kitchen.
- **Make labels.** Labels help kids associate words with things. You can label everything your child sees or uses: *door, wall, sofa, bed, light switch.* (Hint: Masking tape shouldn't hurt walls or furniture.)
- **Teach riddles.** Children like to hear riddles and repeat them to others. Here's an example: What do you call a sleeping bull? *A bulldozer.*





- **Sing.** Your child can learn about words by singing songs he hears or invents. Encourage his interest in music and teach him new songs, including the ABCs.
- **Visit the library.** In addition to checking out books, ask about special events for kids. Also, see if your child can sign up for his own library card.
- **Buy or make puppets.** Help your child put on a puppet show of a favorite story—or one he made up himself.
- **Role play.** Suggest that your child pretend to be a doctor, waitress or other person. This gives him the opportunity to use interesting words, such as “pulse” and “menu.”
- **Finger play.** Finger plays such as “The Itsy Bitsy Spider” help children act out what words mean.



Be a Good Role Model

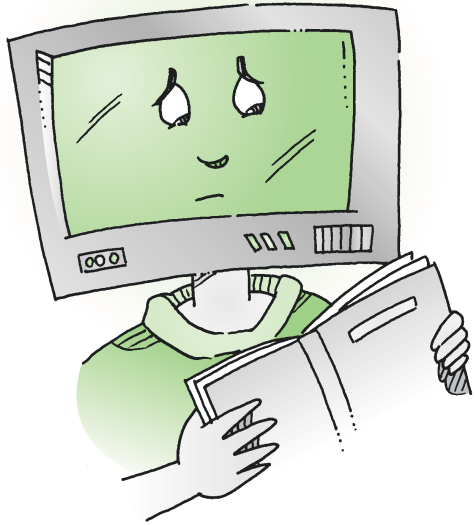
Even when you're not talking, reading, or playing with your child, you're still teaching her about language. She's learning from everything you say and do. Here are some ways to make sure you set a good example:

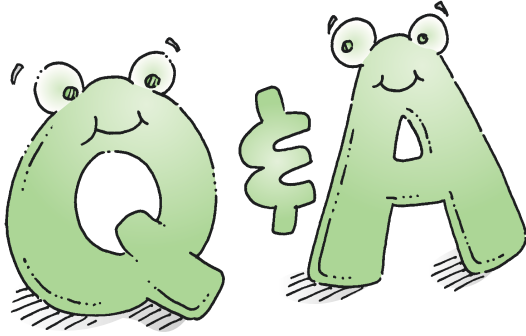
- **Read.** Let your child see you reading aloud and to yourself throughout the day. Read everything from signs, to books, to magazines, to food labels.
- **Write.** Show your child how important written language is by taking notes, making lists and writing letters in her presence.
- **Speak correctly.** Children repeat everything adults say, including mistakes. Here are some common grammar errors to avoid:
 - Say: I could have, not I could of.
 - Say: I'm not hungry, not I ain't hungry.
 - Say: I did that yesterday, not I done that yesterday.

Set Limits on Electronics

Studies show that children who spend too much time on their devices do worse in reading than kids whose parents set limits on screen time. You can reduce screen time in your home and make it more productive. Try some of these ideas:

- **Make a weekly media plan.** Write down which shows your child plans to watch in the coming week. Selecting a reasonable amount to watch *on purpose* makes sense to most children.
- **Issue tickets.** Decide which programs are Okay for your child to watch, then pass out “tickets,” each good for 30 minutes of screen time. When the tickets are gone, the electronics are turned off for the week. In some families, kids can redeem unused tickets for rewards
- **Put devices in an out-of-the-way spot.** Convenience is a big reason children spend so much time on electronics. Experts say a child’s room is a bad place for a television.
- **Talk about games and programs.** When your child does watch a program, try to watch with him. Discuss what you see and answer his questions. If a program upsets your child, turn it off and talk about his concerns.





Questions and Answers

- Q. Will growing up in a bilingual home affect my child's language skills?**
- A.** It can take a little longer to learn two languages at once. But with parents' support, most children can accomplish this just fine.
- Q. At age three, my child spoke almost perfectly. Now she's four and she's making errors. What's happening?**
- A.** It's normal for children to make mistakes as they experiment with new grammar rules. For instance, when children learn that "ed" signals the past tense, they may use it in the wrong places: "He bringed it to me" or "I writed that." (But, if your child has forgotten many words she used to know, ask your doctor to check your child for possible problems.)
- Q. My child has strong language skills—when he speaks—but he isn't very talkative. How can I help?**
- A.** Conversations with shy children can be difficult. But don't let this discourage you. The more you talk with and do things with your child, the more comfortable he may become with language.

Parents are the key to children's language development. Children who learn to communicate well at home are more likely to find success at school. And you can benefit from teaching about language, too. You get to enjoy more activities with someone you care about most—your child.



Learning About Language is one of six titles in "The School Readiness Series" of booklets for parents published by The Parent Institute®, P.O. Box 7474, Fairfax Station, VA 22039-7474. Call (800) 756-5525. Copyright © 2020 The Parent Institute®, a division of PaperClip Media, Inc. www.parent-institute.com

Publisher: Doris McLaughlin. Publisher Emeritus: John H. Wherry, Ed.D.
Writer: Susan O'Brien. Editor: Erika Beasley. Translations Editor: Victoria Gaviola.
Staff Editors: Rebecca Miyares & Alison McLean.
Production Manager: Sara Amon.
Customer Service Manager: Peggy Costello.
Business Manager: Cynthia Lees.
Distribution Manager: Marc Sasseville.
Graphic Design & Illustrations: Joe Mignella, Maher & Mignella, Cherry Hill, NJ.