



by Karen Stephens

Language Is a Powerful Influence on Children's Development

No matter how strong people become physically, the most powerful tool they've ever had is a good command of language. Whatever your walk of life, language is critical for clear, effective communication and successful interactions. The ability to acquire and comprehend language is a human birthright — a unique adaptation in our survival kit. In fact, language is such a precious skill that it can only be learned from another human. Research proves children can't learn to speak or understand language from television or radio alone. The essential ingredient is direct and regular interactions with a warm, engaging person. (Isn't it nice to be needed?)

Language mastery does more than help kids chatter non-stop. (Though a tired parent might doubt that.) It also helps them understand and cope with emotions. It helps forge important attachment bonds to family and caregivers. The ability to analyze ideas, even basic ones, such as hot versus cold depends on language. That in turn becomes a building block for critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making. Through language, children make sense of experiences and the world around them.

In fact, language is the foundation for most learning—whether it is factual knowledge, social skills, moral development, or physical achievement. Like all achievements great and small, a child's path to language competence begins first with a responsive mom and dad. You are their lucky first teachers.

Though not all children learn language at the same rate or pace, they all do go through predictable stages of development. And how fascinating, even mesmerizing, it is to watch the stages unfold. Let me share some examples that highlight the process.

Scene 1: Snack sharing

I'm giving 6-month-old, blond wispy-haired Carrie her favorite snack of dry Cheerios. As I slowly bring one to her mouth, she purses her tiny pink lips and croons, "OOOO's." Then with chubby fingers, she carefully picks up a Cheerio herself. Deciding to be generous, infant Carrie brings it to my mouth, cooing, "OOOO's." We repeat our game over and over until she's full (and I'm sick of Cheerios).

Scene 2: Car talk

Driving along country roads, 2-year-old Connor sits beside me in the backseat. As we pass a tall water tower, he points and says in amazement, "Big balloooooon!"

It's a good analogy, don't you think? It's logical, because at this point in his young life, there's no way Connor can fathom a tower holding water for a whole town. Time, maturation, and experience hold the key to that enlightenment.

Scene 3: Word play

Carolyn, light-hearted teacher, says to her preschool student, "Kristi, is your real name Merry Christmas?"

Kristi says, "Noooo, silly."

Two beats pass, then a light bulb goes off in Kristi's head. She brightly returns her teacher's tease with, "Yes, my name IS Merry Christmas! But they just call me Kristi."

Scene 4: Party talk

On the way to the babysitter's house, Gina tells 4-year-old son Stevie that he'll stay at Marcia's while she goes to a baby shower. Then she explains what will take place

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at the party. As Stevie walks into the babysitter's house, he broadcasts, "Hey, Marcia! Guess what! Mom's going to a baby tub!" What innocent confusion. It will be a while before Stevie grasps that language isn't always literal.

Scene 5: Lunch chat

At child care five children, ages 3 to 5, eat lunch together. As they dig in 4-year-old Alice pipes up that she and her mom went to a football game. Cecil and Tamara chimed in that they went, too.

Cecil was most impressed by the fireworks. He emphasized an important distinction, "The fireworks only go off when WE score, not THEM. Only when WE score. Never when THEY score."

Alice liked the "stomping" band best, and wondered why they "hid" in the bleachers during the game. The children each offered a theory, but never reached consensus.

Scene 6: Deep thoughts

Out of the blue, 7-year-old Caulteen asks her teacher, "Why do people have to die?"

The teacher tries to simply explain some things that cause death, such as why a heart would stop beating or lungs stop breathing.

But concerned with more than biological functions, Caulteen pointedly says, "No, I mean, why does it have to happen at all? What can't people just live forever?"

For a little girl, that's one mighty big question . . .

Watching the Language Emerge

Could you notice the developmental differences in language usage? The examples show how children begin learning language by picking up labels and names of what they encounter. Food and body parts rank first on the list.

Eventually language allows children to note similarities and differences, thus comparative adjectives creep into their vocabulary like big and little, we and them. Identifying more abstract concepts, such as emotions and feelings, comes later.

As children master language, it becomes a vehicle for building social relationships. That was clearly happening as preschoolers discussed the exciting details of a football game. And you could see how they were grappling with cause and effect. In their minds, the children thought the band was "hiding," not cheering along from the stands.

Being able to pin down observations and then express perceptions is how language allows children to make sense of experiences and events. Sometimes children master concepts in leaps and bounds, sometimes very gradually; but throughout the process language gives them a tool for picking apart curiosities.

Young Kristi had learned how to use language to charm her nursery school teacher. Humor, quick wit, and playful use of language helps people build lasting relationships. And it's an ice breaker welcome in any social circle.

Most amazingly, we see that by age 7, Caulteen used language to help her ponder life's greatest mystery; one that humans have been struggled with for eons. Her question about life and death could never be contemplated without words to express her anxiety.

The more a young brain is stimulated with appropriate experiences, the better prepared children are for mastering the wonderful tool of language. In fact, research reveals that language and brain development are intricately related, one nourishing the other, especially during early childhood. As children grasp language, their brains' learning (or neural) pathways become more detailed. We literally nurture better learners by building language skills.

Without a doubt, children's language skills bloom when parents provide a fertile bed of soil. That fertile soil is made up of responsive parenting, consistent routines, social interactions with peers, and a wide variety of first-hand experiences.

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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