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HEIDELBERGER ELTERNTRAINING

zur Förderung des Spracherwerbs

How a child learns to speak

How parents can support their children
in acquiring language



Learning to speak...

Language accompanies our everyday life from the very beginning: unborn children already possess the ability to hear inside the womb. As early as six to ten months, children start to babble (da da da) and around the age of one, they start to say their first words. At the age of three, most children have the ability to say more than 1000 words and form complete sentences.

How does language acquisition work? What influence do parents have on language development? How much and in what way should parents talk to their children? These questions will be answered in the following brochure.

How language acquisition works

Listening:

Infants are able to hear in the womb, as a result they become accustomed to their mother's language and their surroundings. Just after birth, infants recognize their mother's voice. They learn to face in the direction from which the speech originates and they enjoy listening to it. They are capable of acquiring any language in the world. However, the only language they actually acquire is the one being spoken to them.

Seeing:

Vision helps with language acquisition, as children connect words like 'ball' to the actual object. But blind children can't do that so they often learn to speak at a slower pace than their peers with normal eye-sight and then catch up later. In addition, children look at our mouths while we speak in order to mimic the movements of our lips.

Thinking:

Long before children speak, they are capable of thinking. Following examples are necessary skills for children's

language acquisition: they must understand facial expressions and gestures, as well as memorize the sound and meaning of a word.

Organs and Motoric:

Talking is a very complex process in which the mouth, the tongue, the vocal cords, the palate and multiple facial muscles are involved. It is very good if a child practices making noises with its mouth from an early age on. At just three months, infants try to emulate the sounds 'ah' and 'oh'. Try it for yourself: Look at your baby and calmly talk to him or her. If your child looks back at you attentively, say 'ah', wait for them to reply and repeat again.

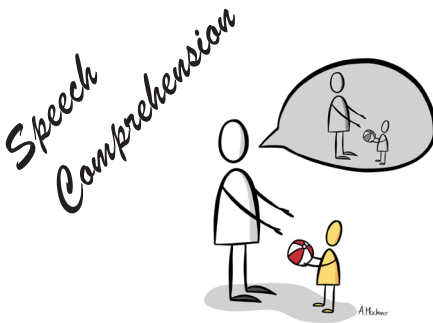
Social development:

Starting at birth, children are social beings. Only a few days after birth, children show an extensive interest in the voice and the face of their mother or father. If there are people who care for them lovingly and talk to them frequently, they will develop well and learn how to speak.

Basics for supporting language

Speech Comprehension :

Even before children say their first words, they can already comprehend a lot. By the age of 10 months they already possess the ability to comprehend the word 'ball' in the question 'Do you want to play ball?'. They know the meaning of the word and crawl under the table to retrieve the ball. Still, they cannot yet pronounce the word. Mostly, children start to say words out loud that they already understand. You can help your child vocalize new words: Say the word out loud and simultaneously point to the corresponding object.



Enjoying speaking:

Children obtain language skills more easily if they enjoy speaking. A child must develop an interest in language. This works best when it notices the effect its speech has. If a child says 'car', the child should still receive the toy car even if it pronounced the word incorrectly, like 'tar'.

Show your child that you also enjoy speaking. Talk to your child during meals, while taking a bath, playing, etc.



The role of parents and other attachment figures

A child only learns to speak well when it is surrounded by people who it is comfortable with and who regularly converse with it. For a child to comprehend a word's meaning, e.g. 'car' for the driving thing, it must hear the word very often and must see the car at the same time. If the child shows interest in cars and if it always hears the word when it points to one, the child will learn to

say the word very soon. A child can only say certain words that he or she has already heard in its environment. That means every child needs parents, grandparents, care-takers or other attachment figures who take the time to talk to them. You as parents or other important role models can help your child to learn language more easily through a language-fostering attitude.

How you can foster language acquisition

Turn directly to your child.

A child learns words a lot faster in situations in which it shows a lot of interest. This may be the bird in the meadow or the tractor in the field. At that moment it is a good idea to take time for your child and directly turn towards him or her. Communicate face to face (maybe squat) on eye-level and look them directly in the eye. This way, you show your child that you are truly interested in what he or she has to say or show to you. Furthermore, you can hear your child better this way.

Wait for what the child has to say.

Let your child talk a lot. Wait even if you already know what your child wants. Only this way can your child practice speaking. Afterwards, summarize in your own words what you just heard: “Bro-

ken? The bulldozer is broken?” This way your child can listen to the words it was missing and it can also memorize them.

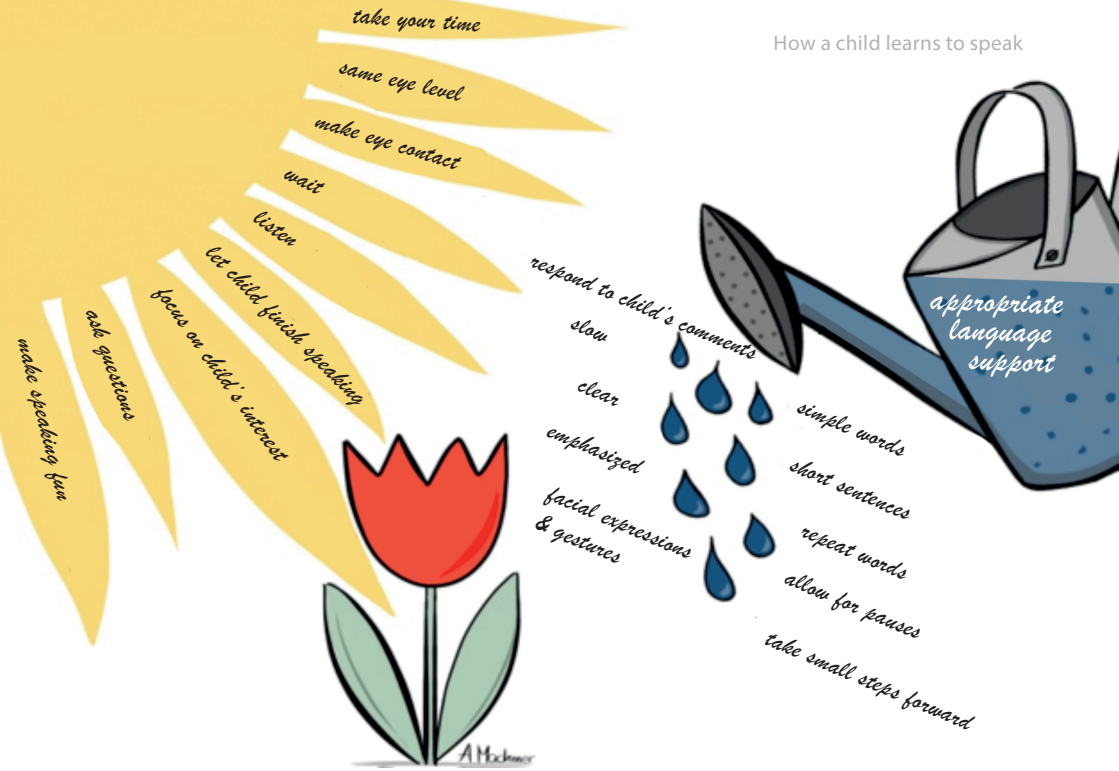
Let the child finish speaking.

Listen carefully to your child and give him or her enough time to finish speaking. That way you show your interest in what he or she has to say. Also, you motivate your child to proceed.

Show interest in topics your child is interested in.

Even if your child has not been speaking a lot, react positively to your child’s attempts at expression and try to understand every bit of what he or she has to say. That way your child notices that language can produce certain effects. First and foremost, pay attention to the content and not to the mistakes.





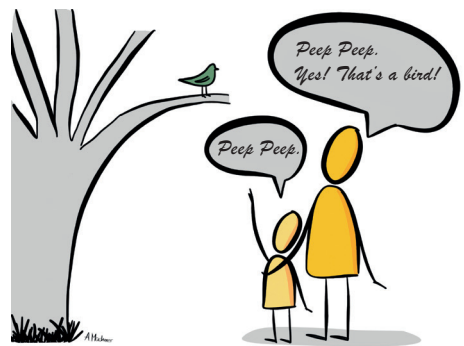
Take up your child's point of interest.

The introduction of new words works best if one is interested in the things they describe. The same applies for us adults.

Pay attention to your language

Adjust your language to your child's stage of development. If your child is just learning its first words, then it is a good idea to speak slowly, clearly and in short sentences. For example, say: 'This is the bulldozer.' Accentuate the most important word 'bulldozer', that way your child is more likely to understand and memorize it. If you repeat the word in a second sentence 'You like the bulldozer.' your child will remember it better. Because new words need to be repeated often in the beginning. Also use facial expressions, gestures

and baby talk like 'peep-peep' in connection with the corresponding word 'bird'. This will help your child to become more attentive towards language and to more easily learn new words.



Create Language Islands

Everyday situations are best for language acquisition. There are always moments that produce opportunities for parents to engage their child in a conversation: while changing diapers, taking a bath, getting dressed, setting the table,

having breakfast, eating ice cream, at the zoo, etc.

Also, situations in which your child wants to help with household chores are also good for talking to each other. A particularly nice situation is looking at picture books together. Children like to discover



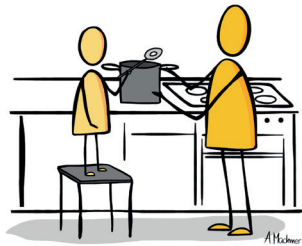
er and talk about things inside the book that they already recognize. Take advantage of this situation and let your child talk about its discoveries from inside the book and touch upon that. But in everyday life there are also brief moments to talk a little bit, like tying shoes, noticing

an airplane or comforting your child. These moments can become small language islands if you consciously turn towards your child and talk together about his or her interests.

Most importantly: Enjoy yourselves while talking to each other.



Language Island





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