For Immediate Release

All About Baby Talk

*Lori Hayungs, Human Sciences, Family Life*

Why is it, whenever I see a little baby...I immediately begin talking in a high pitched voice and before I know it my vowels are streeeetched...and I hear myself saying, “What a darliiiing baaaybeeeeee?"

Child development experts call this musical cadence of talking “parentese” and more and more researchers are telling us how important “parentese” is to the development of infants and their future learning success. Early childhood experts have known for a long time that babies who have caregivers who talk to them frequently learn more words.

In groundbreaking research completed almost 20 years ago- Betty Hart and Todd Risley looked at the development of language in children at a very young age in their homes. They entered the homes of 42 families from various socio-economic backgrounds to observe interactions between a parent and child that shape language and vocabulary development. Their findings showed huge gaps between the number of words spoken as well as the types of messages and interactions. They found that 86% to 98% of the words used by each child by the age of three were directly from their parents’ vocabularies. They also learned that not only were the words they used nearly identical, but also the average number of words utilized, the length of conversations, and the speech patterns were all extremely similar to those of their caregivers. This certainly is not new research, but educational policy and practice have been slow to integrate this knowledge.
And now researchers like Patricia Kuhl at the University of Washington’s Institute for Learning and Brain Science share similar research findings and tell us that “the more a parent talks to their babies face to face, using parentese or “baby talk” the more words the child will know by the time they reach age 3”. Kuhl tells us that the most effective technique is to exaggerate vowels sounds and raise the pitch of the voice. The baby is much more likely to babble back. This is a sign that they are picking up the tools needed to learn new words.

So if it’s exposure to the verbal language that infants need why not just play DVD’s? Why not run it 24/7? Kuhl and other believe that there is no benefit with DVD recordings to pick up language. “There is something special with face to face communication.”

It is interesting that many are thinking the key to early learning is talking. Specifically, the more a child is spoken to from parents and caregivers alike the better. So parents, put those smartphones away. Shut off the television. Put away the iPad and talk, talk, talk to your babies. Purposely expose them to new words, by reading aloud, conversing, interacting and “narrating” life experiences. The research tells us that by waiting until age 4, we have wasted precious time in our children’s development. The window to learning starts early.

Subscribe to the Science of Parenting blog at www.scienceofparenting.org. The Science of Parenting is a production of Iowa State University Extension and Outreach.

ISU Extension and Outreach Contact:
Lori Hayungs, Human Sciences, Family Life
(605) 310-6318 or lhayungs@iastate.edu