



PART OF THE
"BETTER BRAINS FOR BABIES" COLLABORATION

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Building Baby's Brain

The University of Georgia College of Family and Consumer Sciences

Learning Language

Have you tried to learn a new language? Learning to speak a second language is hard. Many students study Spanish or French in high school. Not many ever speak it well.

But learning language is easy for most babies. Babies start to know what others say in only a few months. They learn to speak very well in only a few years.

THE BEST TIME TO LEARN LANGUAGE

Why is it easy for babies to learn to talk? Why is it much harder for adults? The answer is found in our brains.

A baby's brain is ready to learn language. Babies are born with millions of brain cells that control language. These brain cells connect with other cells early in life. They make pathways in the brain. Babies hear adults talking. This helps their language pathways grow stronger.

Language pathways in the brain are well set at about age 10. Learning a new language is harder after age 10. The brain is "wired" for the language they learned first.



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LEARNING IS LANGUAGE-SPECIFIC

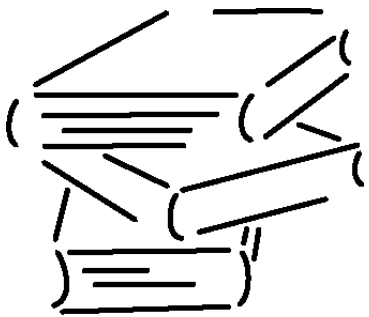
Babies learn language when people speak it. New babies can hear the sounds of many languages. They hear more than the language of their parents. Three-month-old babies know hundreds of sounds.

When people speak around them, babies listen to the sounds they make. The brain pathways grow stronger for that language. Brain pathways for other languages get weaker because the brain doesn't need them. By age 12, the brain gets rid of pathways it doesn't need.

Learning a new language is much harder for adults. Their brains have gotten rid of pathways for other languages. Their brain pathways are "wired" only for English. Their brains must fit the new sounds into the old brain pathways.

ADULTS HELP BABIES LEARN TO TALK

Adults help babies learn language just by the way they talk! Most adults talk differently to babies than to other adults. They talk more slowly. They say words more clearly. They speak in a higher voice. These changes make it easier for babies to learn our language. Babies learn to listen when people talk to them. And hearing what our words sound like helps them get ready to talk.



Adults often repeat words when they talk to babies. This repeating gives babies extra chances to listen to our words. The extra listening helps the language pathways in the brain grow stronger and stronger. That's one reason why babies like to hear the same story or song over and over.



WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Talk to your baby!

This is the most important thing you can do. Talk to your baby when you are feeding her or changing her diaper. Don't feel silly because the baby can't answer you. Your baby listens to your words long before she can talk. That listening helps her learn language.

Play language "games" with your baby.

Repeat sounds he makes. Add new sounds. Take turns "talking" with your baby. Recite nursery rhymes. Play patty cake. These games help your baby learn about language.

Read to your baby.

She hears the words even if she does not know what they mean. And reading books helps a child learn to love reading.

Don't watch too much TV.

Babies learn language by hearing real people talk. Voices on TV are not the same!

Have your baby's hearing checked.

Babies who can't hear have a hard time learning to talk. Babies with hearing problems may need special help. Get your baby's hearing checked by an expert when she is young.

Teach languages early.

Your child can learn to speak two languages well. Start when he is a baby! If you want your baby to learn English and Spanish, for example, speak both languages at home every day.