

TALK TO ME, **BABY!**

When your little one utters their first word it's an exciting time. Whether it's "Dada" or "Mama," talking is an important milestone, and this is how it happens

BY CLAIRE BARNARDO

One of the cutest and most joyful times is when your baby finally starts to talk. While this milestone happens differently for each toddler, it's something that eventually happens one way or another. But there's more to talking than just words. It's a vital development that your baby has been preparing for from the start.

WHEN IT HAPPENS

During their first year of life, most babies don't say any words that we understand as such. But they are developing to talk from the very beginning. "Their language skills begin to grow the minute they are born. Their first form of communication is crying – they cry when they are hungry, tired or uncomfortable. From around three months your baby starts to coo and gurgle, and at six months your baby's vocalisations start to sound more like words – 'Baba' and 'Dada', for instance," says Corli Hanekom, a speech and language therapist. "At 12 to 15 months they start to produce words. The number of words a baby can say varies

greatly at this age. Some babies will only say one word while others will say more than a dozen. At around 18 months your baby will probably say about 20 words."

A NEW CHATTERBOX

Speech starts to develop in babies in the form of vocalisations and babbling sounds. "The babbling and sound productions become more complex as a baby ages. In order for expressive language to develop in children they first need to understand the language by hearing it constantly before they will be able to speak the language. The first words that develop are usually a same syllable repetition like 'Dada', 'Mama' or 'Wawa'," says Corli. The child's speech then starts to develop from one word utterances to two word utterances, to short sentences as the child's vocabulary increases. The most common first words for children are "Mama" or "Dada" and then "Cat".

As your child starts to engage in language, it feels very rewarding for parents. But it can be frustrating for the new talker. "Most children make mistakes when they learn to talk, so it's

“THE UNDERSTANDING OF LANGUAGE COMES BEFORE ANY LANGUAGE USE”

normal for a toddler to mispronounce certain words or to replace more difficult sounds with easier sounds. However, most sounds need to be developed by the age of five years," says Corli.

WHEN TO WORRY

While all children develop at different paces, it's important to realise that the understanding of language comes before any language use. There are underlying conditions that can influence speech and language development, like recurring ear infections, epilepsy and certain syndromes (such as Down syndrome). Neurological conditions such as autism or cerebral palsy also have an effect on speech and language development and a delay in communication milestones is not uncommon.

"Alarms bells are raised when a



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toddler does not respond when you call her or does not respond appropriately to simple instructions. If she has difficulty imitating or does not try imitating simple sounds, syllables or words; if she prefers pointing to vocalising when she requests something; or if she previously used words, but stopped using them," says Corli. Have your child checked out by her paediatrician if you notice any of these conditions, who may refer you to a speech therapist for intervention.

SPEAKING TO YOUR CHILD

You are a great source of encouragement when it comes to your child learning to talk. "Language stimulation at a young age is extremely important. This means speaking to your child in such a way that enhances understanding and includes positive conditioning," says Corli. Here's what to remember when you talk to your child to boost her language skills:

- ✓ Look directly at your child's face and wait until you have her attention (eye contact) before you begin talking to her.
- ✓ Stand or sit close to your child when you talk to her – especially if she is prone to ear infections.
- ✓ Speak slowly and clearly.
- ✓ Use short and simple sentences.
- ✓ Respond to your child's noises and expand on what she is trying to say, for so for "bottle" – "give me my bottle".
- ✓ Encourage and praise your toddler even though her speech is not always correct. Never punish or scold your child if she pronounces something incorrectly, as she may become scared of speaking if she gets negative attention.

ENCOURAGING LANGUAGE

Besides speaking correctly to your little one, there are many ways you can encourage language development as well. Corli shares her top tips on how to achieve this.

- ✓ **PLAY** Through play your child learns about the things, noises and people around her. Language stimulation is heightened when you play with your child, plus it's great fun.
- ✓ **IMITATE** For example, when your child

says "eee" when she wants his milk bottle – you repeat her noise (imitation) and then say "milk bottle". She now hears the correct word even though she can't say it yet. The more your child hears the correct word the more likely it will be that she will say the word herself.

- ✓ **EXPAND** When your child points to a certain toy she wants, like a car, you can say "That is a car" and you repeat this a few times so that she hears the correct word often. It is important to repeat the

words and short sentences such as, "Yes, it is a red car" or "A car goes brrrrrrm."

✓ **MODEL** If your child says something that is not correct, like, "Daddy give me sweet," then you say "Yes, daddy gave you a sweet," which is the correct way of saying what your child wanted to say.

- ✓ **FORCED ALTERNATIVES** When your child points to two things, like milk and a biscuit, you ask her "Do you want milk or biscuits?" She must try and say what she wants by choosing an option. **YB**

YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED BY OUR EXPERTS

EDUCATIONAL PSYCHOLOGIST CARA BLACKIE ANSWERS

MY TODDLER HAS STARTED HAVING NIGHT TERRORS. IS THIS A RESULT OF SEPARATION ANXIETY?

CARA BLACKIE SAYS:

There are a few reasons why toddlers often suffer from night terrors. One of those reasons is due to separation anxiety. This normally occurs around a certain age range (from one year) as your toddler becomes very aware of being a separate person from his mother. With separation anxiety your child may cry or throw a tantrum when you put him to sleep at night. He may also wake up in the middle of the night wanting comfort. Night terrors, however, are seen to be more terrifying for the parent and not for the toddler. Night terrors occur during the very deep part of sleep and therefore your toddler is fast asleep and does not have any recollection of what was going on. Making sure your toddler is safe and protected and trying not to wake your toddler up while he is having a night terror is all that you can do in this situation. Night terrors are different from nightmares in many ways, and nightmares normally start around three years of age.

There are other causes of night terrors other than separation anxiety and it being a normal developmental stage. For example, when a child is overtired or sleep deprived they are more likely to have night terrors as they have a greater need for deep sleep. Anything containing caffeine or sugary foods given too near to bedtime can also cause night terrors. Finally, night terrors can also run in the family. There are a few things parents can try to do to minimise night terrors at night. Try to continue with a day time nap routine. When it comes to separation anxiety at night, try to keep a consistent routine (story, hug, kiss and then leave).

Changing a toddler's normal routine (let their toddler sleep in their bed, for example) can influence future sleeping patterns. If your toddler does call out for you in the middle of the night, soothe him and then tell him that he is safe and needs to go back to sleep. Having his favorite toy or blanket with him can also help him feel more comfortable with separation from you at night. Remember that this is a typical age-appropriate stage of development and if it does last too long you may want to consult a sleep specialist or child psychologist.



Email your question to: kerryn.kemp@yourbaby.co.za. Please note that experts unfortunately cannot respond to each question personally. The answers provided on these pages should not replace the advice of your doctor.

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