

# THE TALK SHOW

The way you speak to your little one will have a big impact on how his language develops and even affects his IQ. (No pressure!) Raise a chatty child with these proven babble boosters.

BY JENN BERMAN, PSY.D. | PHOTOGRAPHS BY BRIAN MARANAN PINEDA

Starring ...  
**ME!**

I have to admit, I was nervous about becoming a mom. As a psychotherapist, I spend my days talking to people. This, I like to believe, is what I do best. During my pregnancy with my twin daughters, the prospect of dealing with a human being—much less two—who could not communicate with words and would not be able to understand me sent shivers down my spine. But I've worked hard to verbally connect with my girls, who are now 3, and I've figured out what really helps—and what doesn't.

One of the most interesting things I've learned about babies and language: It's ideal for moms and dads to use 30,000 words per day with their child. In fact, a major study by Betty Hart, Ph.D., and Todd Risley, Ph.D., found that the number of words spoken to a child has a direct impact on her future IQ score. Some experts say that parents overestimate how much they speak to their kids. (As a quirky frame of reference, 30,000 words is like reading *The Cat and the Hat* 21 times in a day.) The following methods are natural, easy things you can do to keep the chitchat coming.

## 1 LOOK FOR OPPORTUNITIES TO TALK.

Whenever your child gazes at you or at an object, gestures, or makes cooing sounds, consider that your invitation to start a conversation. So if your baby's watching you prepare her bottle, say something like, "I see you looking at me. Are you wondering what I'm doing? I'm getting your bottle ready. I thought you might be hungry."

## 2 Say it. Then say it again.

It might be boring for you, but repetition is fascinating to your baby. Hearing the same word a few times in a row actually reinforces the neural pathways that link sound and meaning in your child's brain. Repetition also gives him the chance to search his memory for the concept you're talking about and eventually confirm it in his mind. By the time your child is 1, he'll know most of his necessary speech sounds, but he won't understand when to use them. Repetition is the key to helping him master this task.





**3** Follow the leader. Research has identified two types of parents. The “facilitative” ones allow their kids to lead their conversations and activities. Parents with a “directive” style, on the other hand, choose the toys to play with and subjects to talk about. Turns out that facilitative parents are much better able to help their child’s language development.



## 4 Take turns talking.

This shows respect for your child and teaches him the give-and-take of conversation. You can do it from Day 1, long before your child has words: Pause after you say something to him, as if you're waiting for him to answer. Over time, he'll understand that this is his chance to give you a verbal response.

## 5 Speak "Motherese."

You know, that animated, high-pitched, singsong way parents often talk to their children. Studies have found that babies show more interest in people when they're speaking Motherese and that infants exposed to it develop a larger vocabulary and better grasp of grammar. Start cutting back on Motherese when your child is between 18 months and 2½ years old, though, because she may start to emulate your slow, exaggerated pronunciations.

## 6 MAKE EYE CONTACT.

It's helpful for your baby to see your face when you're communicating because he'll be able to watch the way you use your mouth to form words. Try to kneel, sit, or bend down when you speak to your toddler. We've made a habit of doing that in our home.

One day, I was sitting on the floor and one of my daughters leaned over to make eye contact with me as she spoke. Simply knowing that she took the care and energy to look right at me made me feel special. It is this feeling of significance and love that gives children the confidence to use language.

## 7 Let her tell you what she wants.

You can do this even before she's verbal. If your baby finishes her bananas and you think she'll want more, instead of automatically putting more on her plate, wait for her to point, grunt, sign, or ask for more (depending on her age and level of communication). Or simply ask, "Would you like more bananas?" Instead of withholding something from your child, just give her the chance to ask for what she wants.

## Language-Boosting Techniques

These were developed by speech pathologists for children who are having trouble learning language, but they can benefit all kids.

Technique	How to Do It	Example
<b>Modeling</b>	Use the word your child is trying to say without correcting her.	Child (pointing to bottle): "Baba!" You: "You'd like your bottle?"
<b>Self-Talk</b>	Describe what you are doing, thinking, feeling, seeing, or hearing.	"I am putting your dirty clothes in the hamper. I want them to be clean the next time you wear them."
<b>Parallel Talk</b>	Describe what your child is doing.	"Shayla is putting away her toys."
<b>Expansion</b>	Turn your child's utterance into a complete sentence.	Child: "Mommy eat." You: "Yes, Mommy is eating lunch with Ashley."
<b>Extension</b>	Add to a topic without necessarily modeling a complete sentence.	Child: "Airplane!" You: "Big airplane high in the sky!"



Learn more ways to help your baby's verbal development by visiting [parents.com](http://parents.com) on your mobile phone.



## 8 NARRATE EVERYTHING.

Use daily care rituals (diaper changes, feeding, bathing, dressing, and bedtime) to connect with your child. By describing what you're doing and commenting on his actions and curiosities, you'll be speaking 30,000 words a day in no time.

## 9 Read to your baby.

**You can never start this habit too early!** Reading just three picture books to your child each week has been shown to boost vocabulary by 15 to 40 percent. By 8 months of age, babies can recognize specific words up to two weeks after hearing them in a book. Need more convincing? Studies have found that 2-year-olds who were frequently read to from an early age had advanced language skills.

## 10 Use sign language.

Many parents believe that if they teach their child to sign, she won't be motivated to speak. But studies have shown that babies who learn to sign are better at recognizing letters and sounds and eventually have a larger vocabulary and higher reading level than those who didn't.

Reprinted with permission of Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., from *Superbaby: 12 Ways to Give Your Child a Head Start in the First 3 Years*, by Dr. Jenn Berman. Copyright © 2010 by Dr. Jenn Berman.

## Five Language Mistakes

Even those of us with the best intentions sometimes do the wrong thing. These are the most common missteps.

### •You talk at your baby.

Most people are not great listeners. In fact, researchers have found that many parents miss their kids' first words! It's easy to do when those words are often mispronunciations. By pausing to listen to your baby's babbles, you may actually pick up on the fact that "ba" means "bottle."

### •You try to force the words.

This is what *not* to do:

**Baby** (reaching for the ball): "Uhh."

**Parent** (holding the ball out of her reach): "Say 'ball.'"

**Baby** (getting frustrated): "Uhh."

**Parent** (still holding the ball out of baby's reach): "If you want the ball, say 'ball.'"

**Baby** "Waaaah!"

### •You fix your child's speech.

Have you ever talked to a know-it-all friend and been corrected mid-sentence? It completely takes the wind out of your sails and makes you feel like not saying anything at all. That's the last thing you want for your child. So if she uses a word the wrong way, simply say it the right way when you respond to her.

### •You use baby talk.

Your job is to model correct speech, and baby talk can be misleading. Keep in mind that baby talk is not Motherese. If a child says, "I want my milkey!" a parent speaking baby talk would say, "Here is your milkey!" A parent using Motherese, on the other hand, would say, "You want your milk."

### •You talk too much.

I recently spent time with my friend and her toddler son at the park, where she never stopped speaking to her child. "Tree! This is a tree! Trees have leaves! Look at the leaves! They are green! Look at the squirrel! Squirrels eat nuts! We eat nuts too! Nuts are crunchy!" She seemed to be trying to squeeze those 30,000 words a day into a single hour. By the time we left the park her son had barely spoken a word. Her mistake is one that well-meaning parents often make, but with a few subtle changes in her approach, she and her son will be on their way to a lifetime of good conversation together.

