



KIDCARE CANADA

nurturing the best possible start

Video Specific Discussion Q & A



Born to Communicate - Chapter One How Do Babies Learn Language?

Categories of questions:



Short answer questions (help participants to warm up and connect to their previous learning)

- *Can babies hear in the womb?*

ANSWER: Yes they do! Beginning in the second trimester, your baby can detect sounds from outside your body. By 9 weeks of pregnancy ears are beginning to form. By around 16-18 weeks of pregnancy your baby is probably detecting noises from your body (e.g. heartbeat) and by week 24 they hear muffled sounds from outside and will turn their head in response. <http://www.whattoexpect.com/pregnancy/fetal-hearing/>

- *Do newborns recognize the voices they heard before birth?*

ANSWER: Yes. Research confirms that babies recognize their mother's voice and other voices they have heard regularly.

- *Can you have a conversation with a baby?*

ANSWER: Yes! In fact parents are encouraged to have back-and-forth (or serve and return) conversations with their baby. This is where the parent says something and waits for baby to respond.

- *Is a crying baby talking to you?*

ANSWER: Yes! Vocalizations of all types, including crying, are the only way young infants can express themselves. Crying sounds become vowels and grunts become consonants when babies learn to speak.

- *Do babies experience emotions?*

ANSWER: Absolutely! Even in utero they are responding. The goal of all parents is to have their baby feel safe and experience pleasant emotions as too many negative emotions lead to the release of stress hormones. That is why new parents are encouraged to smile at their babies, sing, speak in soft tones, etc.

APPLICATION

Personal experience questions (help participants apply what they have learned – make it personally relevant and meaningful)

- *How have babies responded when you have sung to them?*

ANSWER: Many babies calm down, many babies respond positively to singing even when the singer thinks they don't have a good voice. It could be that we calm down when we sing and babies pick up on this. It could be familiarity of the rhythm pattern that mimics a calm heartbeat. There are many reasons why a baby may be crying and it could be that the baby must have needs (like hunger) met before they can respond to singing.

- *Have you ever observed anything that made you think a baby was listening while sleeping?*

ANSWER: The research is clear that babies can hear while asleep. Parents may have interesting stories to share – one of the authors of this work noticed many years ago that when she spoke to her sleeping newborn son he sucked intensely on his pacifier without waking. See BTC3 for more research on this.

- *What is it like when a baby responds to your emotions?*

ANSWER: It can be very rewarding when a baby responds, particularly when the baby is old enough to smile back at your smiles. Similarly, it can be very upsetting to see a baby cry because the parents are upset or angry. The research is clear that the first relationships a baby has create a template for all future relationships. Babies are learning from us how to behave in a relationship. We are teaching this by example whether we intend to or not.

- *Can you describe a moment with a newborn when you felt you were having a conversation?*

ANSWER: Many parents describe this first happening around 6 or 7 weeks. Babies are able to vocalize in some form of “Serve and return” – which is when the parent says something to the baby, then is quiet which gives the baby a chance to vocalize in response. It may be ooh or aaahhh sounds at first (up to the first couple of months of life). Consonants appear when babies are a bit older. Parents are encouraged to engage in conversations throughout babies’ lives.

- *Do you believe that most people, including babies, understand more words than they can produce? Why do you believe this?*

ANSWER: Most people will say yes to this because most people do understand more words than they can produce throughout life (in their own language and in additional languages they might be learning). Babies start to understand words long before they can speak. So speaking to babies (and exposing them to words they will eventually be able to say) is the way babies learn.

REFLECTION

Open-ended questions (help participants reflect and move towards deeper learning)

- *Why do you think it is important to comfort a crying baby with kind words and cuddles?*

ANSWER: in the past, many people discouraged this practice. Today we know that this is how babies learn trust. Babies need to know that someone will respond to their needs.

- *What kind of emotional environment do you think would increase the opportunities for babies to learn language?*

ANSWER: The research is clear that babies need to feel safe. They need to be in a quiet and alert state to learn best. They thrive when they feel safe.

- *Babies in a quiet, alert state are most receptive to learning. What can you do to create those moments?*

ANSWER: When basic needs of babies are met (they have been fed, changed, have fresh air and have slept), they are more likely to experience a quiet alert state. These are the ideal opportunities to talk with, read to, sing to and play with babies. If we can focus on our babies' needs, it gives them the best possible start. As babies get older, they have more and more of these moments.

- *We know that the early months of life are very important for language learning. How does parenting “trial and error” contribute to this?*

ANSWER: Parents gradually learn to recognize their baby’s cues and what different cries might mean. The learning is ongoing and the important thing is for the parents to keep trying. If feeding doesn’t seem to be the answer, parents can try a diaper change or something else. Babies don’t need parents to get it right the first time but they do need to sense that the parents are trying. Explaining in words can be helpful – “I can see you’re upset about something. I’m going to try to figure it out. It’s okay. You’ll be better soon.” It calms the parent down as well as giving the baby a chance to hear and learn words of comfort. Everyone in this relationship will also learn a strategy that relates to future learning.

- *How might a preschool be designed to enhance language acquisition for toddlers?*

ANSWER: Learning is naturally enjoyable for children. The ideal learning environment encourages this natural tendency. When the emotional and learning environments are well designed, toddlers feel safe. Toddlers who feel welcomed and understand what is expected of them can relax and enter into a receptive state. Then they are ready to learn through singing, talking (with adults and peers), reading, nursery rhymes and physical play. Children benefit when teachers speak using a non-threatening tone and language that children understand. Toddlers don’t require electronic devices or complex academic content.

All questions are examples only and have been designed to be modifiable. They are currently framed for professionals who support families.

If your audience is comprised of parents, we recommend you change the wording to make it more personal.

e.g.

- *Can you describe a moment with a newborn when you felt you were having a conversation?*

Could become

- *Can remember a time with your baby when you felt you were having a conversation?*

And

- *Do you believe that most people, including babies, understand more words than they can produce? Why do you believe this?*

Could become

- *Have you ever thought your baby could understand what you were saying long before your baby could talk? What did your baby do to make you think that?*

And of course you may want to design questions of your own!

Suggested approach

Before showing the video

Decide on a couple of questions from the “Previous Learning” category above to put to your participants.

- Ask a first question and engage participants in a discussion. You may want to use questions like, “Have others had similar experiences?” to encourage all participants to speak.
- Depending on your time availability (3 hour session), ask a second question.

Ask participants to notice if these questions are also addressed in the video.

After showing the video

- Ask for first reactions to the video – words that come to mind? Interesting comments they recall, or something that was new to them
- Remember to refer back to your question(s) prior to watching the video and ask participants how those questions were addressed in the video

Application questions

- Then move onto the “application” questions to further discussion and provide participants with the opportunity to relate what they saw in the video to their own experiences
- Ask how participants might change their actions with infants because of the video – or suggestions they might make to new parents because of the video

Reflection questions

- Move on to “reflection” questions to encourage deeper thinking about the topic

Closure

- Depending on the time available and the group you are working with, either summarize key discussion points or ask participants to summarize some of the key discussion points and share what they will continue to do because of the content of the video or what changes they will make because of what they have learned from the video.

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DISCLAIMER

The content of KidCareCanada videos is informed by current research and shared by experts in the field. It should not be used for diagnosing or treating, and is NOT a substitute for professional care.