

# Babbling babies—responding to one-on-one 'baby talk'—master more words

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Common advice to new parents is that the more words babies hear the faster their vocabulary grows. Now new findings show that what spurs early language development isn't so much the quantity of words as the style of speech and social context in which speech occurs.

Researchers at the University of Washington and University of Connecticut examined thousands of 30-second snippets of verbal exchanges between parents and babies. They measured parents' use of a regular speaking voice versus an exaggerated, animated baby talk style, and whether speech occurred one-on-one between parent and child or in group settings.

"What our analysis shows is that the prevalence of baby talk in one-on-one conversations with children is linked to better [language development](#), both concurrent and future," said Patricia Kuhl, co-author and co-director of UW's Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences.

The more parents exaggerated vowels – for example "How are youuuuu?" – and raised the pitch of their voices, the more the 1-year olds babbled, which is a forerunner of word production. Baby talk was most effective when a parent spoke with a child individually, without other adults or children around.

"The fact that the infant's babbling itself plays a role in future language development shows how important the interchange between parent and child is," Kuhl said.

The findings will be published in an upcoming issue of the journal *Developmental Science*.

Twenty-six babies about 1 year of age wore vests containing audio recorders that collected sounds from the children's auditory environment for eight hours a day for four days. The researchers used LENA ("language environment analysis") software to examine 4,075 30-second intervals of recorded speech. Within those segments, the researchers identified who was talking in each segment, how many people were there, whether baby talk – also known as "parentese" – or regular voice was used, and other variables.

When the babies were 2 years old, parents filled out a questionnaire measuring how many words their children knew. Infants who had heard more baby talk knew more words. In the study, 2-year olds in families who spoke the most baby talk in a one-on-one social context knew 433 words, on average, compared with the 169 words recognized by 2-year olds in families who used the least babytalk in one-on-one situations.

The relationship between baby talk and language development persisted across socioeconomic status and despite there only being 26 families in the study.

"Some parents produce baby talk naturally and they don't realize they're benefiting their children," said first author Nairán Ramírez-Esparza, an assistant psychology professor at the University of Connecticut. "Some families are more quiet, not talking all the time. But it helps to make an effort to talk more."

Previous studies have focused on the amount of language babies hear, without considering the [social context](#). The new study shows that quality, not quantity, is what matters.

"What this study is adding is that how you talk to children matters. Parentese is much better at developing language than regular speech, and even better if it occurs in a one-on-one interaction," Ramirez-Esparza said.

Parents can use baby talk when going about everyday activities, saying things like, "Where are your shoooes?," "Let's change your diiiiaper," and "Oh, this tastes goooood!," emphasizing important words and speaking slowly using a happy tone of voice.

"It's not just talk, talk, talk at the child," said Kuhl. "It's more important to work toward interaction and engagement around language. You want to engage the infant and get the baby to babble back. The more you get that serve and volley going, the more language advances."

Provided by University of Washington

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