

A LINE ON LIFE

1/21/87

Do You Speak “Motherese”? *

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At about 6 months of age, infants are capable of making the basic sounds of all languages. However – depending upon what the people around the child say or do – the child will learn only one or a few of these languages. During the first years of life, the mother is the person who is most likely to be around the child. How do mothers – or any other caretaker – facilitate the child's language development?

Logically and most basic, it is important to talk to the child. This assumption has been supported by psychological evidence. Beginning with the earliest months of life, children whose parents talked to them frequently developed a larger vocabulary and tended to learn grammar faster than children whose parents talked to them less. In these studies, specific rewards did not seem to be important, but exposing the child to a large amount of language did seem to make a difference. In a sense, it seems to provide the child with more linguistic “food” – more examples, more different sentences and more to “digest.”

Second, it seems to help if parents speak in **simpler sentences** when talking to young children. (Listen to yourself the next time you talk to a two-year-old. You will probably do it automatically.) This simpler language is what linguists sometimes call “**motherese**,” since it is the way mothers talk to their toddlers.

How does “motherese” differ from normal adult speech? There are several noticeable differences.

1. The sentences are short. In addition, unlike adult speech, “motherese” is nearly always grammatically correct. When talking to each other, adults often create such complex sentences that we lose track of the subject of the sentence or the correct pronouns. This is rarely true with “motherese.”
2. “Motherese” uses simple grammatical forms with relatively few modifiers and subordinate clauses. For example, instead of saying, “*Since it's Grandma's birthday today, I think it would be a good idea if we called her,*” the parent of a 2-year-old child is more likely to say, “*Let's call Grandma today.*” (For those of you who do not want to admit your ignorance, “*Since it 's Grandma's birthday today*” and “*if we called her*” are subordinate clauses.)
3. Basic forms are repeated over and over. When conversing with toddlers, adults often have conversations in which virtually the same sentence – with only minor modifications – is stated several times in a brief period.

"Show me the horsie."

"Yes, that's the horsie."

"You showed me a horsie."

"Now show me the doggie."

4. With "*motherese*," the adult speaks to the child in a higher-pitched voice, speaks more slowly and has clearer pauses at the end of each sentence. These changes make the adult voice stand out more for the child and make it easier for the child to develop the concept of a "*sentence*."

5. In contrast to talk among adults, the vocabulary used with children is more concrete. "*Motherese*" refers to things or people that are in sight or well known to the child. Words are chosen that are more likely to be understood by the child, even if they are less precise. The tiger in the zoo may be referred to merely as a "*big kitty*." Rather separately labeling collies, schnauzers and cocker spaniels, they are all called "*dogs*."

These features seem to make it easier for the child to learn the language. However, most of us do not speak this way to foster language development in our children. We talk this way to be understood. Most of us do it quite automatically. We need no lessons.

Expanding the child's speech is not the same as correcting it.

There is another thing that parents can do to help their children's language development that is not so automatic. It involves **expansion** or **recasting** of the children's sentences. Essentially the children's sentences are repeated back to them, but with a few more grammatical forms added. For example, if your child says, "*Johnny up*," you can expand it by saying, "*Johnny wants to be picked up*" or "*I'm picking Johnny up*." Doing this periodically seems to speed up the language process by giving the child information about new grammatical features that have not been learned yet.

However, this is not the same as *correcting* the child's grammar or pronunciation. Correcting seems to be associated with developing vocabulary *more slowly*. With young children, the word, "*No*," has a strong effect – even though some parents believe it has no effect at all. Besides being an indication to stop ongoing behavior, "*No*" usually causes some anxiety. Thus it seems better to expand the speech rather than to correct it.

To summarize, if you want to help your child to learn language more efficiently, it would probably help to:

1. talk to the child more often,

2. use simpler language,

3. expand the child's sentences occasionally,

4. not correct the child's speech or use punishment.

* Adapted from Houston, Bee and Rimm's Essentials of Psychology, Academic Press, 1985, pages 206-207.