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Early Childhood Education

A Gryphon House Book

Easy
Activities
for Birth
to Age 3!

RAISING A Talker



RENATE ZANGL, PhD

Raising a Talker

Simple Activities to Boost Language and Learning

RENATE ZANGL, PhD

Also by Renate Zangl, PhD:

Spracherwerb bei sehenden, hörenden, hörgeschädigten, gehörlosen und blinden Kindern
(trans: *Language Learning in Seeing, Hearing, Hearing-Impaired, Deaf, and Blind Children*),
1994

Die Dynamik des frühen Fremdsprachenerwerbs (trans: *The Dynamics of Early Second-Language Acquisition*), 1998

Die Diagnose des frühen Fremdsprachenerwerbs (trans: *The Diagnosis of Early Second-Language Acquisition*), 1998

Dynamische Muster in der sprachlichen Ontogenese: Bilingualismus, Erst- und Fremdsprachenerwerb (trans: *Dynamic Patterns in the Ontogenesis of Language: Bilingualism, First- and Second-Language Acquisition*), 1998

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RENATE ZANGL, PhD



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Introduction

Because many children seem to learn to talk and communicate without much effort, families and other caregivers often mistakenly think they can do little to foster this development. Not true! The more caregivers engage with infants and toddlers in meaningful, language-rich interactions, the more opportunities those babies have to build strong communication and language skills. Such early interactions pay off and give young children a head start. They result in better language skills and higher IQ scores at age three, and in more advanced cognitive and language skills well into the early school years. A child who can express herself well has an easier time making her wishes and needs heard, can regulate her emotions better, and can connect with people around her more easily. After all, we connect with each other most through language.

Raising a Talker examines how infants and toddlers learn to communicate, understand, and talk. Families and caregivers are so important in helping young children build strong communication and language skills. Everything a baby learns about her world she learns through communication with you, even early on. And science is clear: Enriched conversations with little ones matter.

The Science behind *Raising a Talker*

We know a great deal from science about how children learn to communicate and to make sense of sounds, words, and sentences. This book translates those scientific findings into concrete, practical tips that families and caregivers can use to jump-start communication and language learning and to better tune in to the needs and skills of young learners. These simple tips and strategies involve small, conscious efforts such as stretching words and exaggerating lip movements during face-to-face chats that make what a child hears and sees more memorable and easier to learn. But do not be fooled: *Simple* does not mean unimportant. These tweaks are communication and language catalysts.

A child's brain is malleable; it is shaped by her experiences. Learning experiences build upon each other. What and how much a child can learn from early conversations affect how she will learn from new experiences. Good communication with babies is central to their brain development.

The best time to start building solid language skills is in the first three years of life. Even as soon as a child's second year, big differences in language skills can emerge, as reported in a 2013 *New York Times* article titled "Language-Gap Study Bolsters Push for Pre-K." Researchers at Stanford University found that children from less advantaged environments lagged behind more advantaged peers at eighteen months, and by two years of age, these same children showed a gap of no less than six months. Researchers Hart and Risley estimate that children from homes where they are spoken to often hear **more than 20 million more words** by age three than children from homes where they are seldom spoken to. Since young children learn

primarily from their families and caregivers, it is these early conversations, reading, and playtime that provide infants and toddlers with the perfect fertilizer for a great head start.

You can jump-start a child's communication skills by providing a language-rich learning environment from her earliest moments. You are much more than a bystander! You can shape and enhance what and how much she takes in, which affects how much she can learn—now and later on—and how she will communicate with you.

Providing a Head Start

Many families and caregivers want to give children a head start. They know that good verbal skills contribute to a happy and thriving child in preschool and beyond. Families often have questions as they seek to put their children on the right track:

- When should I start talking with my child?
- Should I talk in a singsong voice with my child?
- Do I really need to repeat a lot?
- When is the best time to start reading or to introduce the alphabet?
- How do I introduce the alphabet?

There is a growing market of DVDs, flash cards, talking dolls, talking toys, and talking books. They sell well because they are marketed as having educational benefits for little users. But, are such gadgets the right way to help your child learn language and give him an early cognitive push? Research says no.

Researchers at the University of Washington took a closer look at videos marketed to babies, and their results, published in the journal *Pediatrics*, made headlines in 2007. Infants who watched so-called baby videos learned fewer words than their peers who spent the same amount of time interacting with real people. And fewer words is significant when you consider that these babies only have a handful of words in their vocabularies to begin with. It seems that younger babies are particularly vulnerable. In a 2010 study of children ages twelve to twenty-four months that was published in the *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine*, Richert and colleagues found that the earlier babies watch baby videos, the smaller their vocabularies.

What about other products, such as talking books? They may seem like a great idea; however, a closer look suggests that they cut into the quality of the conversations. Even though caregivers talk approximately the same amount of time as when they read traditional, nontalking books, when reading talking books they use many more directions centered on managing the child's behavior. They focus less on the book itself.

Talking toys are problematic as well. Even though a child hears lots of words as he hits buttons to make sounds and pictures happen, the words he hears most likely do not help his understanding. Why? Because he gets criss-crossed labeling—for example, when his toy spits out the word *duck*, he has already moved on to hitting the next button, which shows the picture of a cat. The timing is off. Babies who are starting to communicate need more than toys can offer. They need interaction with a person.

Language researchers Patricia Kuhl and colleagues designed a clever study in which they examined whether nine-month-old American infants learn Mandarin Chinese sounds better from real people or from recordings. In the study, Mandarin Chinese speakers read books with some infants live. Other infants heard and saw the same speakers read the same materials via TV screens. Another group of children just heard Mandarin Chinese speakers on audio recordings. It turned out that the infants only learned the sounds when they interacted with actual people. Audio recordings and TV sessions were useless for learning. Babies learn best when they see, hear, watch, and engage with real people.

It seems that young learners need face-to-face interactions to make learning experiences stick. A live person can immediately tune in to a child as he looks at you, points at something, or babbles. It is this well-timed back-and-forth between you and the child that gives real-life interactions that extra edge. Personal interaction shows a child that you are focused and with him, and that keeps him focused and ready to learn more.

The good news is that you already have everything you need: yourself—your vocal cords, eyes, hands, and fingers—and a desire to communicate with a little one. The baby is naturally interested in you and wants to understand and talk with you. She prefers your voice, your words, and your face over anything else from the time she is born. And she has enormous learning potential.

Although all learning rests on a complex interaction of genes and a child's environment, in language, the kinds of experiences a child has seem to have more impact than the genes. Researchers Robert Plomin and Philip Dale led an extensive twin study in 1998 with more than 3,000 two-year-olds. The study looked at environmental versus genetic influences in identical and fraternal twins. In typically developing children, the researchers found that the environment matters much more than the genes. The amount of interaction and the way caregivers interact with children is crucial. In another twin study, Stephen Petrill showed that the environment plays a key role in the development and growth of reading skills. This puts a lot of responsibility in the hands of your daily interactions and conversations with infants and toddlers. That means you can affect how a child learns to communicate.

Using This Book

Raising a Talker provides fun bonding activities and tools that encourage you to engage the child in your care in enriched conversations that provide the best possible foundation for strong language and communication skills. With little tweaks and conscious changes, you can easily and naturally transform play sessions into language-learning experiences and make your interactions more meaningful using practical, science-based tips and strategies.

Babies learn language best from interactions with real, live *you*. Jump-start a child's language skills by engaging him in lots of face-to-face conversations: smile back at him when he smiles; wiggle the fluffy dog and say, "That is a dog," as he babbles; or engage in fun rhyming games. Your words, smiles, looks, and gestures are the strongest language-learning tools you have.

The sheer number of words you use in your daily interactions with a child helps build a bigger vocabulary. And quantity is not the only factor—quality matters, too. The way you speak with a child; how and when you say sounds and words; how often you tune in to and pick up on a child's babbles, words, and actions; and how often you ask questions all have a tremendous effect on how the child learns to communicate and to acquire language. It is that extra mile that gives those interactions the richness, support, and diversity infants and toddlers need to excel.

This book is written for use with typically developing children. However, the tips and strategies for supporting communication, language, and learning may be helpful for speech language therapists and caregivers who work with children who have minor language problems.

Raising a Talker provides more than fifty activities filled with practical, easy-to-use tips and strategies to build strong communication and language skills in children from birth to age three, the most exciting time in language learning. Each age range includes a brief overview of how children that age communicate and what aspects of conversation they pick up and work on. This book also discusses the cognitive, physical, and social-emotional changes that affect how a child communicates. Language checklists let you quickly track the child's growing communication and language skills at the end of each age range. Chapter 8 summarizes early warning signs of potential problems for each stage as well.

Early communication with a child is a delicate dance between the two of you, where one leads and the other follows, then vice versa. To better guide that dance and tune in to the child's emerging skills, *Raising a Talker* has easy-to-use goals, tips, and strategies for each activity. These encourage you to closely monitor conversation skills on both sides. This will help you become a more responsive partner on the fascinating journey into language. Keep the following in mind while playing:

- **Have fun!** Building a relationship comes first. Infants and toddlers learn best when they have fun and enjoy their time with you. Learning follows naturally.
- **Integrate language and play activities into your daily routines.** There is no fixed amount of time to play, but a child's brain thrives with repetition. That means that even if you are bored, a little one most likely is not. She is discovering something new that strengthens her understanding. Never push a child, use the tips and strategies as language drills, or exert any linguistic pressure.
- **Be safe.** The activities are generally safe, but since young children explore objects with hands and mouths, put all objects and props away when you are finished playing.
- **Provide downtime.** Babies need time to integrate and learn from their experiences. Watch the child carefully—she will let you know when she has had enough, even before she says words.
- **Be flexible.** Adjust the activities to the developmental needs and stages of the individual child. The age ranges of developmental overviews and play activities refer to the *average* age when children go through the milestones and accomplishments. Each child will hit milestones in her own time. Many activities can be enjoyed much longer than during the age range given, often with minor adjustments.

After years as a language researcher, and having played with hundreds of infants and toddlers, I have learned one thing for certain: Infants and toddlers are smart communicators. They often make you laugh and ponder as their language lets you peek into their logic. I hope that the emerging language skills you witness will leave you with a sense of wonder and excitement about their thoughts, ideas, and feelings unfolding in front of your eyes through language.

The age spans in this book are general guidelines at best. There are wide individual differences between babies. The organization of the book offers loose recommendations on when to start certain language activities and what a child might tackle next, but it will not tell you exactly when he will reach certain milestones. Each child will learn to communicate at his own pace. It is your job to provide the best foundation for him. If you have concerns about a baby's language development, talk with a health professional.



The First Year: From Gurgles and Sounds to Understanding

As you hold an infant in your arms and wonder what he understands, assume it is more than you think. Much language learning happens behind the scenes in the first year. It takes a baby a lot of hard, diligent work to reach the milestone of his first word. Thanks to research, we can say language learning actually starts in the womb.

A baby's brain nearly triples in weight in the first year, but what changes most dramatically is its wiring. A sophisticated network of neural connections is built in the first twelve months, and the construction of these connections depends greatly on a baby's experiences. As you connect with him in those first few months, you can affect his attention span, how easily and quickly he recognizes his name, and how he learns about the sounds of his language. Science tells us that how children experience language in the first year shapes future language skills.

The first year is an exciting one for the baby and for you. He learns that he can communicate with you, and you learn to understand him. He learns the basics of communication and figures out that his calls, cries, and experimental sounds have an effect: You respond and attend to him. And he thrives on that kind of responsive feedback.

He already takes in all kinds of information. He hears your words and observes your actions. He watches your face and listens to the tone of your voice. He cannot yet figure out what you say, but he soon knows what you mean by your tone and facial expressions. He even notices the sounds you make and how your lips change and move as you talk. He tracks the rhythm of your speech, such as how you pause at certain moments and speak loudly sometimes and more quietly at other times. He learns to carve up speech into structures, such as phrases and sentences.

In the second half of his first year, several big changes happen. He babbles more and focuses more on what you say and when you talk. He becomes aware that your words and gestures have meaning, and he starts to follow your eyes and your gestures more carefully. He plays with toys more and starts imitating you—not just your actions but also sounds and

sound patterns. He begins to understand everyday situations and first words. Of course, his understanding is still on very wobbly legs, and he needs a lot of clues from you.

Interestingly, although he could pretty much differentiate any speech sound when he was born, he can no longer do so on his first birthday. His experiences from listening to you have changed his brain, which is now skilled in the speech sounds of the language(s) he hears regularly. In just one year, a baby has pulled himself from first gurgles to dissecting sounds to understanding first situations and words—an amazing feat!

From Birth and Up—Gurgles and Coos

1

Science Peek

Sarah came into this world just two days ago. She is lying comfortably and listening to speech, but not all of it is equally appealing. Sometimes she hears speech that is happy, with a high pitch that goes up and down. This is very pleasant and affectionate. Then she hears other speech, less happy and a bit boring, with a lower pitch and less variation in tone. She prefers listening to the happy speech, so she looks longer at the visual stimulus when she hears it. Regular adult speech is less exciting, so she looks away sooner.

Newborns love happy speech and singsong talk. Developmental researchers Robin Cooper and Richard Aslin showed that newborns engage longer when listening to baby talk. This suggests that it is important for families and early childhood specialists to use lots of happy, affectionate speech when talking with little ones.



Researchers have found that the way mothers sing with their babies is similar across cultures. They sing in an infant-directed style, using a higher pitch, a slower tempo, and clear emotions. Infants listen more attentively to this exaggerated style of singing than to other singing styles. They smile, vocalize, and stay engaged longer with adults who sing and interact enthusiastically.

Real-Life Story

Joe looks lovingly at his one-day-old baby, Henry, and wants to get Henry's attention. Joe slowly sticks out his tongue, making it longer and longer while moving it from left to right. He repeats the motion again and again, noticing that Henry's eyes are opening up more and his tiny tongue is coming out a bit, as if he is imitating Joe.



Andrew Meltzoff and Keith Moore discovered that newborns mimic behaviors they observe in adults' faces—from sticking out tongues to moving their heads clockwise to whatever simple actions they notice in the adult engaging with them. Learning to communicate through mimicking is one of a baby's strongest skills.

Newborns are incredibly smart and have tremendous capacities to track, compare, and mimic what they observe—all critical prerequisites for learning language. Babies are primed to communicate, and they do not lose any time getting started.

A Baby's Exposure to Language and the Environment

Babies first learn about language while in the womb. They remember something about the speech that they heard and will recognize it when hearing it for the first time after birth. This explains why a newborn prefers his mother's voice and her language over others. This seems to be true regardless of whether the mother spoke one language or two while pregnant. Babies also prefer listening to stories that were read to them before birth over new stories. Recognizing something in a world where literally everything is new is an important safety anchor.

Babies Love Voices, Faces, and Touch

We all communicate with more than our words. For babies, communication begins with loving smiles, gazes, and touches. Have you noticed that a baby enjoys staring at you, especially when you talk lovingly as you smile and gently stroke his soft cheeks? Your voice, eye contact, and touch are magnets for a baby.

Many parents wonder if baby talk is good for babies. Science is clear: Baby talk is excellent language and brain food for little ones. When babies hear baby talk, they stay engaged in the conversation longer, are more attentive, and smile and vocalize more. Babies' brains are on high alert when listening to baby talk compared with adult talk.

Note that baby talk is *not* silly speech with made-up words; it consists of real words and real sentences spoken with a high pitch and singsong melody. When you speak in baby talk, you articulate sounds more clearly, drag out vowels, and pause longer between sentences. All of those traits make baby talk ideally suited to the auditory skills of infants who hear best the sounds that are higher in frequency, slower in tempo, clear, and distinct.



Baby Talk



Q
A

Does a baby already understand what I say?

Not quite yet; however, he does listen carefully to the tone of your voice, which carries your message.

When should I first start talking with a baby?

Right away. A baby's hearing is better developed than his sight. In fact, infants can discriminate any speech sound and are fascinated by human voices. He is ready to listen and learn.

Coos and Turn Taking

Even though he cannot yet say words, an infant already has a pretty large wordless vocabulary that he uses to communicate. There are cries (increasingly differentiated to reflect different needs), burps, throaty grunts, gurgles, sighs, and first real sounds—called *coos*—which show up at about one month. A baby may coo a lot or rarely, for long periods or in short bursts. All of it is normal. Although his first vocalizations just happen, he soon realizes that they have significant power—they make family members and caregivers attend to him.

The best way to encourage a baby to communicate is to consistently and lovingly respond to his sounds, which sends the important message that he is noticed and heard. Good communication is all about turn taking. Your interactions with the baby teach him that people do not talk continuously, but they also pause, listen, and respond to others. Soon, you will notice that when you talk, the baby listens, and when you pause, he answers—flinging his arms, bursting into coos, and so forth. Your response likely will trigger another response from him, which triggers one from you, and the first back-and-forth exchanges emerge.

Babies Begin to Smile

When a baby is just four to six weeks old, the first social smile may show up, triggered by chatting with or smiling at him. This kind of social smile is an important milestone. It differs from a spontaneous, random smile that he makes at the wall or the crib: It suggests that he sees you, realizes that you are smiling, and responds to it with his own smile. Social smiles make adults feel more connected and acknowledged, and they strengthen bonding.

Babies Become Interested in Objects

Sometime in the second month, a baby may start to swipe at objects close to him, using either his hands or his feet. Like his first sounds, his first swipes are accidental, but the effect gets his attention. This is the perfect time to hang brightly colored objects where he can reach them. He also starts to track objects with his eyes, although erratically. He will swipe at and track objects even more if you talk with him at the same time. You can use language to encourage his explorations.

Language Checklist 1: From Birth and Up

Does the child	Often	Sometimes	Never
attend to you and quiet down when you look at and lovingly talk to him?			
seek your face and the voice he hears by turning his head and moving his eyes and, later, his head?			
demonstrate a sucking/swallow reflex when using a pacifier or a nipple?			
respond to your voice with body movements, vocalizations, or smiles? make social smiles?			
vocalize with soft gurgling sounds or vowel-like sounds?			
seek other sound sources such as music, toys, rattles, and so on?			
respond in conversational pauses with gurgles, smiles, and so forth?			
mimic your facial expressions?			
make eye contact?			

Communication Tips

- Stay close (8–12 inches).
- Get the baby's attention through happy speech, eye contact, smiles, and gentle touches.
- Let him explore familiar voices and faces so he can learn to distinguish them.
- Mimic his vocalizations.
- Have face-to-face chats.
- Use baby talk frequently.
- Model turn taking, the back-and-forth of a conversation.
- Always pause to give him a chance to answer.
- Talk to him as if he can talk with you—treat him like a full conversational partner.
- Use body language (waving, kisses, and so on).
- Sing traditional and personalized songs.
- Let him listen to the sound of his own name.
- Deliberately set aside conversational times with him when you are not distracted.
- Play when he is alert.
- Give him downtime.

LET'S PLAY: INVITATIONS TO LOOK, LISTEN, AND TOUCH

First Communication through Your Voice, Eyes, and Hands

Naturally curious, a baby wants to engage with you. You get his attention through your loving voice, tender gaze, and gentle touches. This starts a nurturing communication that makes him feel acknowledged, comfortable, and secure and fosters a healthy, strong attachment to you.

SKILLS FOSTERED:

- Body awareness
- Listening
- Social-emotional skills
- Visual skills

GOALS:

- Talk with the baby using baby talk.
- Give him opportunities to explore and distinguish familiar voices and faces.
- Provide one-on-one time with him.
- Make eye contact.
- Smile often.
- Give him opportunities for turn taking.
- Sing together.
- Let him hear his own name.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- Does he respond to your voice through body movements, smiles, or vocalizations?
- Does he watch your eyes or mouth as you talk with him?

WHAT TO DO:

1. Sit with the baby securely placed on your thighs, his face oriented toward yours. Look at him and sing or say his name in a friendly, slightly higher tone than usual as you make eye contact: "Hello, **Harry**. How's my little **baaaby**?"
2. Your voice acts as a compass, orienting him to your face. Smile when he looks at you. As soon as he looks into your eyes, gaze lovingly back into his, and tell him how much you love him. Gently touch his cheeks, kiss his nose, and so on.
3. Rock or sway from side to side; this motion is soothing for him. Keep talking or singing. Your friendly voice holds his attention and relaxes him, and he learns about the sounds and rhythms of your language as you chat with him.

Infants are more interested in looking at a face that has looked at and talked with them. When you talk, your voice guides your baby to your face and holds his attention. In combination with your voice, your face makes the baby interested in you. He will gaze at you longer and likely vocalize more.

How Are We Different?

Listening and watching is where language learning begins and where a baby gets to know his caregivers better. For this activity, you will need two people. A deliberate switch from one person to another gives the baby lots to learn and provides some wonderful communication opportunities.

SKILLS FOSTERED:

- Auditory discrimination
- Social-emotional skills
- Visual discrimination

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- Does he become quiet and attend carefully to each person's face?
- Does he respond to the voices and faces through body movements, smiles, or vocalizations?
- Does he show renewed interest when he hears a new voice or sees a new face?

GOALS:

- Give the baby opportunities to learn about voices and faces.
- Let him listen to baby talk.
- Help him recognize family members' and caregivers' voices.
- Let him tune in to the rhythm and sounds of his language.
- Encourage him to imitate and vocalize.
- Help him explore and discriminate familiar faces.

WHAT TO DO:

1. Have the baby lie in the crib or on the changing table, facing you.
2. Introduce yourself. Try to lock eyes while you speak using a friendly, affectionate tone: "Hi, Noah! It is me, your **mommy** (or teacher or aunt or brother). Your **mommy** is here! How do you like my voice?" Speak slowly and pause between sentences.
3. Talk about whatever comes to your mind: the weather, your favorite movie; it really does not matter. All that counts is that your voice sounds happy, that you articulate clearly and pause between sentences, and that you smile. After some time, say goodbye and move out of the baby's vision.
4. Let the other person appear and introduce himself. Move in to about ten inches from the baby's face, so he can see the person's face well. Start talking to get his attention: "Hi, Noah. It is me, your **daddy** (or teacher or grandfather or sister). What a surprise! **Daddy** is here, too! What do you think of me, my sweet little boy?"
5. Just keep talking, but pause deliberately at times so the baby can answer. He is not interested in nonstop chatter, not even as a newborn.
6. Switch back and forth as long as the baby enjoys the game. Because little ones like new experiences, the baby will give renewed attention to each change in voice and face.

Newborns perk up and suck on a pacifier more when they hear their biological mother's voice. It is familiar, which feels good and safe in a world where there is so much new. It takes a couple of weeks for the baby to prefer Dad's voice over that of another male. This suggests that the speed with which babies recognize voices as familiar depends on the experiences they have had.

Let's Sing Together

Singing is probably one of the first and best language activities for a baby. What you sing does not matter; just sing often and do so in baby-talk style. Play around with volume and pitch, and see if the baby responds to these changes. Use his name in your songs, so he becomes familiar with it. Hearing songs and lines repeated helps him recognize the rhythm and, later on, chunks of phrases and words in songs he has heard over and over again.

SKILLS FOSTERED:

- Auditory discrimination
- Visual skills
- Body awareness
- Gross motor skills
- Social-emotional skills

GOALS:

- Get the child's attention through singing and saying the baby's name.
- Give him the opportunity to listen to the rhythm, sounds, and words of play songs and lullabies.
- Help him discriminate changes in loudness, pitch, and speed.
- Help him learn to recognize his own name.
- Let him explore faces during singing.

What Shall I Sing?

Adjust what and how you sing to the baby's state. If he is tired and about to fall asleep, sing a slow, soft lullaby with a low pitch and a soothing tone. If he is alert and energetic, sing a fast-paced song. If you feel shy about singing, hum a melody with a rising and falling intonation. By singing yourself, the baby gets a much richer sensory experience than recorded music can give him. He hears, sees, and feels you, which supports language learning and bonding.



WHAT TO DO:

1. Sing popular lullabies as they are, or replace the names in them with the child's name—for example, convert "Mary Had a Little Lamb" into a touch-and-kiss song about body parts:

Henry has a little nose, little nose, little nose!

Henry has a little nose that I am going to kiss! (kiss his nose)

Henry has a little hand, little hand, little hand!

Henry has a little hand that I am going to kiss! (kiss his hand)

Henry has little toes, little toes, little toes!

Henry has little toes, that I am going to kiss! (kiss his toes)

And everywhere that **Henry** goes, **Henry** goes, **Henry** goes,

Everywhere that **Henry** goes, Mommy is sure to go.

Continue with other body parts, touching and kissing them as you sing along.

2. Combine songs with gentle movements of body parts to promote body awareness and gross motor control.

And **Henry's** left arm goes out, (gently lift, stretch, and hold his arm)

and **Henry's** right arm goes out, (gently lift, stretch, and hold his arm)

and **Henry's** left arm goes in, (gently bring his arm back in)

and **Henry's** right arm goes in. (gently bring his other arm back in)

Continue with his legs, moving them gently up, down, in circles, or sideways.

3. Create songs by simply singing about what you are doing. Integrate singing into your everyday routine.
4. Rhymes are ideal for language learning because of their words and simple melodies. Combine the songs with loving gestures to make them even more fun for the baby. Sing familiar rhymes, or make up your own.

Tick (touch the baby's nose)

Tock (touch your nose)

Goes the clock and not the sock.

Tick (touch his nose)

Tock (touch your nose)

Another day goes by,

and I say hi! (wave at him)

Nursery rhymes are a staple in young children's lives, but do they actually offer any benefits to children? Researchers Peter Bryant and colleagues found that, by age three, children who know more nursery rhymes develop a better knowledge of sounds and are better at spelling and reading later on. The repetition in a nursery rhyme heightens children's awareness of the sounds in words.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- Does the baby respond to your songs through body movements, smiles, and vocalizations?
- Does he fall asleep when you sing soothingly?
- Does he react differently when you talk with him than when you sing?

My Turn, Your Turn

This activity promotes an essential of every conversation: taking turns. Since taking turns is so fundamental to any conversation, it is best to model and introduce the concept right away.

Exploring the merits of turn taking in early conversations, researchers found that turn taking primes babies to vocalize and communicate with caregivers. Three-month-olds who were engaged in typical turn taking vocalized more than their same-age peers who experienced random responses from adults. And, their vocalizations sounded more like speech sounds than noise. This means you can affect how much a baby vocalizes by carefully structuring your conversations to include nicely timed back-and-forth exchanges.

GOALS:

- Give the baby opportunities to learn the back-and-forth structure of conversations.
- Model appropriate turns and chiming in.
- Give him opportunities to vocalize.

SKILLS FOSTERED:

- Coordination
- Gross motor skills
- Listening skills
- Social-emotional skills
- Timing
- Visual skills



WHAT TO DO:

1. When the baby is alert, engage his attention. Comment on his sounds and reactions. Imitate whatever noise or expression he makes. At first, you may have to perform both roles: Ask a question, and then pause a few seconds before answering. A baby reacts more slowly than you do.
2. Wait for him to respond in some way. If he does not, answer for him after a pause of several seconds.
3. Extend and continue to comment on his sounds: “Is that what you think about last night? What an interesting idea you have!”
4. To encourage him to respond, raise your voice to a higher pitch, make a surprised face, smile, and look expectantly at him to clearly indicate it is his turn.
5. Accept anything as a turn—grunts, gurgles, coos, widened eyes, and so forth—and respond to it. Babies want to be noticed, and responding to their behavior encourages them to engage more.
6. Comment on his actions—for example, if he waves or wiggles his hand, pick up that hand and answer as you wave back at him: “Who is waving? It is **Alex!** Alex is waving.” Again, notice if he answers your words and gestures.
7. Make a funny sound, such as clicking your tongue, clapping your hands, or snapping your fingers. Watch how he reacts.
8. Ask questions and touch the body parts you talk about—for example, ask, “Where is your **nose?**” going up in pitch on the last word. Pause for a few seconds, and then answer, “Oh, there is your **nose,**” as you touch it. Or wiggle your fingers and say, “Here are my **fingers.** They’re gonna get you!” as they approach and gently tickle him. Repeat the same sequence a few times, and then stop midway and wait expectantly with your hand still. See if he reacts.
9. Stick to the same structure and timing in songs, first games, and routines. Such repetition helps a baby understand the structure of conversations and anticipate when it is his turn.
10. Use popular nursery rhymes that incorporate actions—for example, play “This little piggy goes to market,” as you gently tickle or massage each of the baby’s toes. Pause after each toe and expectantly look at him. Create your own rhymes as well.
11. Play peekaboo. Look at the baby’s face, and once he looks back at you, move your face back slowly while saying, “**Peeka...**” Move forward slowly, and when you are very close to him, gently say, “**boo!**” Stay within ten inches, so he can see you. Repeat the sequence a few times, and see how he reacts.

When can I expect a baby to take turns?

That depends on how often you model turn taking with and for the baby. If you do so from the beginning, he will have a good sense of it by about three months.

What counts as a turn?

Anything at this age counts—any sound, noise, action, or reaction by the baby, including crying, burping, staring, or widening his eyes.

WHAT TO LOOK FOR:

- Does the baby begin to react in some way to your pauses, such as moving, staring, or widening his eyes?
- Does the baby chime in with little noises? (The timing does not need to be perfectly coordinated.)



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The research is clear: Early, language-rich interactions give young children a head start. Little tweaks and easy changes in the way you play and engage with a child from birth can help jump-start enormous learning potential.

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Renate Zangl, PhD, is a developmental psycholinguist with a deep interest in how infants and toddlers acquire language and communication skills. She has more than 15 years of experience in research in early language learning and has worked at various research institutions in the United States and Europe. Her work has been published in numerous books and peer-reviewed articles in eminent language journals, and she gives presentations at national and international conferences.



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