

# Preschoolers: Language and General Knowledge Development

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Children can develop language skills only if they have many opportunities to talk, listen and use language to solve problems and learn about the world.

Long before your child enters school, you can do many things to help her develop language. You can:

> Give your child opportunities to play. Play is how children learn. It is the natural way for them to explore, to become creative, to learn to make up and tell stories and to develop social skills. Play also helps children learn to solve problems—for example, if her wagon tips over, a child must figure out how to get it upright again. When they stack up blocks, children learn about colors, numbers, geometry, shapes and balance. Playing with others helps children learn how to negotiate.

> Support and guide your child as she learns a new activity. Parents can help children learn how to do new things by “scaffolding,” or guiding their efforts. For example, you and your toddler put together a puzzle, you might point to a piece and say, “I think that this is the piece we need for this space. Why don’t you try it?” Then have the child pick up the piece and place it correctly. As the child becomes more aware of how the pieces fit into the puzzle, you can gradually withdraw your support.

> Talk to your child, beginning at birth. Your baby needs to hear your voice. Voices from a television or radio can’t take the place of your voice, because they don’t respond to your baby’s coos and babbles. Your child needs to know that when he makes a certain sound, for example, “mamamamama,” that his mother will respond—she will smile and talk back to him. The more you talk to your baby, the more he will learn and the more he will have to talk about as he gets older.

Everyday activities provide opportunities to talk, sometimes in detail, about what's happening around him. As you give your child a bath, for example, you might say, "First let's stick the plug in the drain. Now let's turn on the water. Do you want your rubber duck? That's a good idea. Look, the duck is yellow, just like the rubber duck we saw on 'Sesame Street.'"

> Listen to your child. Children have their own special thoughts and feelings, joys and sorrows, hopes and fears. As your child's language skills develop, encourage her to talk about her thoughts and feelings. Listening is the best way to learn what's on her mind and to discover what she knows and doesn't know and how she thinks and learns. It also shows your child that her feelings and thoughts are valuable.

> Ask your child questions, particularly questions that require him to give more than a "yes" or "no" response. If, as you walk with your toddler in a park, he stops to pick up leaves, you might point out how the leaves are the same and how they are different. With an older child, you might ask, "What else grows on trees?"

> Answer your child's questions. Asking questions is a good way for your child to learn to compare and to classify things—different kinds of dogs, different foods and so forth. Answer your child's questions thoughtfully and, whenever possible, encourage her to answer her own questions. If you don't know the answer to a question, say so. Together with your child, try to find the answer.

> Read aloud to your child every day. Children of all ages love to be read to—even babies as young as six weeks. Although your child doesn't understand the story or poem that you read, reading together gives her a chance to learn about language and enjoy the sound of your voice. You don't have to be an excellent reader for your child to enjoy reading aloud together. Just by allowing her to connect reading with the warm experiences of being with you, you can create in her a lifelong love of reading.

> Be aware of your child's television viewing. Good television programs can introduce children to new worlds and promote learning, but poor programs or too much TV watching can be harmful. It's up to

you to decide how much TV and what kinds of shows your child should watch.

> Be realistic about your child's abilities and interests. Set high standards and encourage our child to try new things. Children who aren't challenged become bored. But children who are pushed along too quickly or who are asked to do things that don't interest them can become frustrated and unhappy.

> Provide opportunities for your child to do and see new things. The more varied the experiences that she has, the more she will learn about the world. No matter where you live, your community can provide new experiences. Go for walks in your neighborhood or go places on the bus. Visit museums, libraries, zoos and other places of interest.

> If you live in the city, spend a day in the country. If you live in the country, spend a day in the city. Let your child hear and make music, dance and paint. Let her participate in activities that help to develop her imaginations and let her express her ideas and feelings.