

# How a child learns to talk

In this 12-part series, we will explore the development of language and communication from birth to three-years-old – the most crucial stage – at a time when more two-year-olds are entering nurseries.



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**B**Y THE age of three-and-a-half most children – and certainly most girls – will have mastered a majority of the skills they need to communicate well. As they grow and learn they will add several thousand words to their vocabulary, and will put the finishing touches to their pronunciation, but essentially they have learned everything they need to know.

So, if young children can achieve this, we might assume that the process of learning a language must be quite simple. However, many thousands of books and scholarly articles have been written about how and why children learn to talk, and some of them are so complex that I feel as if I need to learn a new language just to make sense of them.

Everyone working with young children needs to have a clear idea of how they learn to talk, because this influences everything we do and the resources and activities we provide for children in our care. Most importantly, it dictates how we will talk with children.

## Amy, Zak and the train set

Below, we will take look at two children talking with each other, and use this short sketch to try and untie some of the knots that linguists and psychologists often unwittingly tie around children's language development.

Two-year-old Amy is playing with her six-year-old cousin, Zak. Amy has just been given a wooden train set, which is still in its box, and Zak is very keen to see what the set is like:

*Zak [Opening the box]:* 'Amy, look at this train set. It's just like mine!'

*Amy [Panicking, runs over and tries to grab the box from Zak]:* 'No Dat. Mine! Mine den bot. Dat den hom. No Dat mine den bot. Mummy no Dat mine den bot. Dat den bot Dat hom.'

[Roughly translated as: 'No Zak. Mine. No box train. Zak train home. Mummy no Zak mine box train. Zak box train Zak home.' This means: 'It's my train. Zak has got his own train set at home.']

*Mum:* 'It's ok, Amy. Zak will show you what to do. He's not going to take your train set away.'

*Zak:* 'Look Amy. You get the two pieces of track. This one is the bridge and this one is the junction. And you click them together like this.'

[Hands Amy the two pieces].

*Amy [Fits two pieces together]:* 'Titadeda.'

[Click together]

Amy and Zak play happily. Amy puts together as many pieces as she can, and each time says to herself: 'Titadeda'. [Click together]

Scenes like this never cease to amaze me. I feel very moved when I think that, 31 months ago, Amy was an egg. In that short time she has become able to communicate sophisticated messages like, 'No Zak. It's my train set. You have got your train set at home. Mummy, tell Zak he can play with his own train set when he gets home.'

True, Amy will be difficult to understand for a few months yet, but both children are determined to make themselves understood – because they need to. If Zak is not clear, then he will not get what he wants, and all hell will break loose, as Amy starts to cry because her communication has failed. So, how has Amy done all this in such a short space of time, at such a young age?

## Outside forces? Following internal rules? Or a bit of both?

The fundamental question that we need to ask about talking is this: 'How much progress is based on the environment that children are brought up in, and how much comes from within the child?' Until the late 1970s, theories tended to focus on the influence of adult behaviour, as opposed to children using internalised rules about language that develop as they grow.

'Behaviourists', such as Skinner and Bandura were at the forefront of explaining much of children's behaviour in terms of rewards and imitation. External rewards, given mainly by adults, drive the child forward to improve what they do. This reinforces the behaviours that we want to promote, including talking. Unwanted behaviours can be negatively reinforced, either by ignoring them or, in some cases, by punishment.

Adults gradually shape children's behaviour, and this is mainly how children learn. Children are also driven by internal rewards that they get from feelings of achievement. So language development is seen in the same way as any other aspect of learning – by children being rewarded for gradually imitating what they hear spoken around them. They feel rewarded by being able to use language to get what they want and need, and to express their feelings and to explore ideas.

Behavioural psychologist Dr Trevor Stevens describes the behavioural or Learning Theory approach to

photo by Lucie Carlier



*Maternal responsiveness spurs a child on to communicate in ever more complex ways, with the turn-taking being crucial for social language use*

language like this: 'Bandura suggested that babies hear a variety of common speech sounds around them and then they try to imitate some of these. Skinner suggested that parents respond by being delighted and praising the child. The child then starts to repeat these sounds because they are rewarded, so slowly builds up a growing vocabulary.

'The theory has some merit – for example, explaining why a child of Japanese-speaking parents will speak Japanese, because he is imitating the Japanese that he hears around him. However imitation and reward do not explain why children all over the world go through a stage where they say things like, "Look, I drew two sheeps"? Their parents will not have spoken to them like this, so they couldn't have imitated it.'

Noam Chomsky explained this phenomenon by describing children as having a Language Acquisition Device (LAD). This allows them to listen to what is being said to them, and to make up, or generate, their own logical rules about language. This would explain why Amy, in our example, does not just imitate what is said to her.

I am certain that Amy's parents do not say: 'Amy mine box train.' They say: 'Amy that's your train set.' Yet somehow Amy uses her own rules at that stage to take what she has heard and to translate it in her

own way. So Amy is acting on what she has heard and responding using her own internal rules. As she gets older she will stop using her own rules and begin to use the accepted grammar of English.

### **It ain't what you do but the way that you do it**

Chomsky's theory and Learning Theory both try to explain 'how' children learn language. Jerome Bruner and Catherine Snow sought to explain 'why' children want to communicate in the first place. Working separately, they looked in minute detail at not just what adults say, but how they say it. They made extensive analyses of mothers and their infants playing and talking together, and concluded that the social world that the child is brought up in is the most important factor in why children learn to talk.

They noted that there is a special code – a form of language – that mothers use when playing and talking with their babies. This 'Motherese' has certain features that makes it easy for the children to understand what parents mean. Much of Motherese is complete gobbledegook, however, very important messages are being conveyed through the exaggerated ups and downs of mum's language with her child. The basic message is, 'I love you and you are the loveliest baby'.



The foundations for language are laid in the interaction between children and their parents or other caregivers. A crucial element of Motherese is the way that mothers respond to their children's sounds and behaviours. This maternal responsiveness spurs the baby on to communicate in ever more complex ways, with the turn-taking between mother and child being crucial for using language socially in conversation.

Bruner and Snow drew our attention to what was happening in social relationships, and particularly in the interplay of communication between mother and child. This led the way for researchers, such as Colwyn Trevarthen, to look at the importance of the emotional development of the child and the emotional wellbeing of the mother – not just for learning to talk, but for the development of communication as a whole.

## Language and the development of thinking

Children need to have a reason for talking – something to talk about, as well as someone to talk with. Michael Tomasello is one of a group of linguists who stress the importance of seeing language developing as part of learning in general. So if a child's first word is 'horse', Tomasello would argue that she has chosen to say this word because she has seen a horse and is very excited by it – she is talking about something she has learned.

Tomasello argues that what makes us unique as human beings is that we understand that language is used to symbolize other things, including objects, actions and abstract ideas – for example, 'I love you' and 'that's not fair'. Children pick out these words – these symbols – that mean something to them, from what Tomasello calls 'the buzz of words they hear around them'.

I think this is a brilliant image for illustrating the genius of what babies do. They are driven by internal forces to make sense of what they hear around them and gradually use this knowledge to communicate with other people. Incidentally, older children and adults do exactly the same thing when they are learning a second language in another country.

I find Bruner's, Snow's and Tomasello's ideas very appealing, because they show that children learn language, not only to get them what they want and need, but also to have fun communicating with other people, and to share their growing ideas and

understanding of the world. These linguists remind us that children need people to talk with, and to learn from. From my experience of working with children with many different patterns of language development, I find that children, like all humans, will learn something new if it makes sense – if it is interesting and linked to something they already know something about.

Child language development is unique, because unlike learning to walk, or completing a puzzle, you must have someone to help you in a loving and positive way. So I would say, most definitely, that we practitioners should look very closely at the social aspects of language development – how adults help children to talk from birth, and the type of environment, and particularly the emotional atmosphere, that we create for children in our care. This includes thinking about our beliefs about language development, and how we talk with children.

## Communication difficulties

Some young children find learning to talk more difficult than others. These early difficulties may emerge as part of a general learning difficulty, or may be an indicator of something more specific, such as dyslexia. Other children may have a particular problem with understanding how to use language socially – they seem to be good at learning words and phrases, but are not using them to talk with other people. This may emerge later, as part of an autistic spectrum disorder. In the UK, many children may be slow to develop language because of hearing difficulties, such as otitis media ('glue ear').

In some cases, children are slower to develop language for no apparent reason, and then shoot ahead at a later stage than other children. Boys are generally thought to be slower to develop speech and language than girls, though I would argue that this may be due to our lower expectations of boys, rather than a built-in difficulty with communicating.

Unfortunately, many children experience difficulties with talking because the environment they are living in is not stimulating enough, or parents and carers are not talking enough with their children, or in an appropriate way. Parents themselves may have additional emotional needs, which prevent them from providing the type of social and emotional support that very young children need. Children with additional language learning needs, who grow up in such circumstances, will be doubly disadvantaged.

Our theories and beliefs about how children learn to talk become increasingly important as we seek to help parents to improve their communication with their children.

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## Useful resources

- *Child Language: A resource book for students* by Jean Stilwell Peccei (2006). Published by Routledge. This book provides a very readable and detailed account of the various theories of language development.

## Key points

- By the age of three-and-a-half most children – and certainly most girls – will have mastered a majority of the skills they need to communicate well
- So, if young children can achieve this, we might assume that the process of learning a language must be quite simple. However, many thousands of books and scholarly articles have been written about how and why children learn to talk
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