

Language Acquisition



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“Language is defined as a code that we learn to use in order to communicate ideas and express our wants and needs. Speech is the spoken form of language” (ASHA, 1). Every child has to go through the process of acquiring a language. Parents make a huge impact on what their children learn and how fast they learn it. The process of language acquisition has several steps or stages. First, the child begins this process by crying. The child then progresses to the stage of babbling. The next stage is the child speaks one-word sentences. After that, the child can use two or three word sentences. Next, the child is able to speak four to six word sentences and are able to be understood by strangers. The last stage is when a child can fluently speak the language, and use long, complex sentences. “Children learn language and speech by listening to the language around them and practicing what they hear. In this way, they figure out the rules of the language code. It is not learned all at once but in stages over time” (ASHA, 1).

When the child goes through the steps to learn the language, there are things that a parent can do to help enhance the child’s speech. Some parents do fail to realize that they may be pushing their child into language acquisition. This result of pushing a child can have a negative effect on them in life. The parents want their child to be the best and force their child into learning useless things. I remember watching “A Baby Story” on television, and a father was bragging about how his two-year daughter knew all the states in America. A child may end up resenting learning language and other subjects in school if pushed too early. There are many areas in school that this sort of pushing can affect. These areas include building and playtime. As long as the parents watch their child and know when the child is overwhelmed with learning, there is no harm in helping with the process of language acquisition. For example, when my son was around two, I would try to read to him. He would get irritated and throw the book. That was my cue that he had enough of that. There are signals that children give to let their parents know that they have had enough.

A child begins the language learning process at birth (Bowen, 1). The child communicates through crying. Parents learn to differentiate between the different cries that their child makes. For example, a parent knows when the child is hungry or needs to be changed. This is based on the different variations of the cries that a child makes. A child also begins to pay attention to new sounds and is startled when a loud noise is made. The child begins to smile and make different facial expressions. Babies begin to coo and gurgle to express their feelings.

“Crying and fussing may be enough communication for a while, but soon the infant begins babbling by making a sound and rapidly opening and closing the mouth” (Infants, 1). Children learn to associate certain sounds together. For example:

“A mother might coo the words ‘pretty baby’ to her infant. By hearing these other

words repeatedly, the baby learns ‘pretty’ is one word and ‘baby’ is another word. Specifically, the babies learn that the sounds represented by ‘pr’ and ‘t’ often occur together in English, while the ‘t’ sound is not often followed by the ‘b’ sound” (Ferber, 2).

When a child babbles, s/he is experimenting with new sounds and new sound combinations. A child connects two sounds together, such as, ‘babababa.’ Children also use repetitive, syllabic sounds (Petitto, 2). I know that my son used to sing out new sounds. ‘Ahahahaha,’ ‘Aaaaahhhh,’ and ‘Lllllaaaa’ are a few examples of what he used to sing. Children also in this stage may use their hands to tell stories to parents and other adults. Even though they may not make words that are intelligible, the child can tell a story that reenacts everything that happened. One day, my son and I were outside playing in the grass. We were looking at the clouds and I was naming off the different shapes that the clouds made. When my mom came home, he told her what we did by pointing to the sky and the grass. He babbled and used his hands to express what we did. The child moves into the next stage when the babbling turns into actual words that are understandable.

The next stage that a child progresses to is the first word stage. Children, on average, are around eleven to fourteen months of age when they speak their first word (Petitto, 2). ‘Mama’ and ‘dada’ are typical first words for children. Many people can only recall their first words through stories that their parents have told them. For example, my mother was driving past McDonald’s and my brother said his first word, ‘fries.’ During this stage, the parent and child develop a partnership that is crucial to the child’s learning. A study showed that children, around eleven months, “made clear to their parents that they were listening to what their parents that they were listening to what other people said and attending to what others were doing” (Hart and Risley, 81). Parents need to be interacting with their child. Parents need to be showing their child different things and concepts. A very important thing to remember in this stage is not to compare your child to other children (Things, 1). When a parent sees that their child is not speaking as well as other children, that parent is more likely to push their child into learning things that the child does not understand. Many parents forget “that milestones are based on average; they are not the criteria for normalcy. Many children develop normally in every respect but do not reach motor milestones and language milestones at the prescribed time” (Wood, 25).

When children begin to use two or three word sentences, they have moved into the next stage of language acquisition. This stage usually occurs around one to two years of age (Bowen, 3). Words also become more clear as the initial consonants are used in words more often (Bowen, 3). Children learn to combine two of the one-word sentences, learned from the previous stage, into one. An example of this would be ‘no book’ or ‘what that.’ Children in this stage may refuse to pronounce words even though they are aware of the sound (Otto, 92). Children tend to deal in different ways when they are dealing with words that they are unable to say. A child may reduce a two-letter sound into a one-letter sound. For example, the sound ‘sp’ would become either ‘s’ or ‘p,’ and

the word spill would be pronounced pill (Otto, 93). On average, a child's speech around eighteen months is about twenty-five percent intelligible (Bowen, 1).

The next stage that a child jumps to is where they learn to put four or more words together in one sentence. A child should be around the age of three when s/he reached this stage. A child's vocabulary grows very quickly in this stage. The child's curiosity is also growing immensely. The child is always asking for a word for each thing that s/he looks at. Matthew was very curious as to what things were. He needed to have a word for everything that I was looking at or doing. Family members can begin to understand their child fairly well. Strangers may be unable to understand what the child is saying or asking for. When Matthew and I went shopping, he would talk to the clerks.

They had no idea as to what he was saying, but I could discern and tell the clerks. It is similar to a parent acting as a mediator during the conversation.

Reading to your child is also very crucial in this stage. "This can be a good opportunity to expose your child to more difficult reading material or to concepts that you would like to explore together" (Things, 2). When Matthew was younger, I would try

to read him stories and get him interested in the books. He would have nothing to do with reading. Now that he entered this stage, his interest in books has increased. It is very enjoyable for us both and gives us a time to bond together. The number of words that he speaks has increased, and he can relate the books to his own experiences. His favorite book is I Was so Mad from the Little Critters series. In the book, the little boy gets mad when his parents tell him no to the things that he wants to do. Whenever I tell Matthew no, he stamps his foot and says 'I was so mad.' It is interesting to see him relate the book to himself. All parents should value the time that they can read to their child. Not only does it create a special bond; it is helping to improve a child's vocabulary and word usage.

Around the age of three to four, most parents take their child to a preschool screening. This check is to make sure that the child is on target with language, motor skills, memory, speech, social interaction, and visual discrimination. I took Matthew to a screening last month. He was on average for most areas, but was behind in the articulation area. They said a lot of his words were unintelligible, and they recommended that I take him to a speech pathologist as soon as possible. They were hoping to get his articulation cleared up before he goes into kindergarten. I was completely appalled. Not only do I view this as a waste of money; I cannot understand why a parent would go to this extreme, especially when their child will be in school in less than four months. A speech pathologist named Dr. Caroline Bowen knows that all children develop at different paces. She feels that there is no need to send a SOS out if one's child is not on target with the average child.

The next stage of language acquisition is when the child is able to create long, complex sentences. For example, the child may say "We went to the zoo but we had to come home early because Josie wasn't feeling well" (Bowen, 4). This stage typically tends to occur around the age of four or five. A child enjoys talking to other people during this stage. A child is able to hold a conversation with a stranger and that person is able to fully understand what the child is saying. The child can pronounce most sounds correctly, but s/he may have trouble using the 'r,' 'v,' and 'th' sounds (Bowen, 4). "The way in which a parents teach their children though scaffolding or supporting the learning

within the zones of proximal development” is of great importance (Otto, 151). Children learn their inner voice through these scaffolding provided by a parent.

During the first few stages of language acquisition, earlier research has shown that mothers speak to their children in a different style. The style of speech was referred to as baby talk or motherese (Painter, 5). Mothers change the way that they speak to match the competence level of their children. As the child’s level increases, the mother produces more complex sentences and fewer repetitions (Painter, 5). At first, the research showed that children learned best when spoken to in motherese. More recent studies have shown that motherese may actually harm the ability of the child to learn language. When language is oversimplified, children are at a disadvantage. They need to hear a variety of structures in their language, and they progress more rapidly with a richer input from their parents (Cairns, 27). When I was in prenatal classes, the teachers strongly advised new parents not to use baby talk. They said that it was always best to use sentences and normal speech around your child. They also said that children are more likely to develop language faster and are better able to understand language when it is spoken normally.

There are many different types of parenting. They can range greatly in the way that each treat their children. To be more specific, there are four types or styles of parenting: authoritarian, authoritative, permissive, and neglecting (Haslett and Samter, 172). Each type of parent will fall into one category; the best style of parenting is the authoritative parent. They are warm and responsive to the child. Children learn the language best with this style of parenting. The relationship between parent and child is based on give and take. The permissive parent does not demand much from the child, but is very responsive to the child (Ramsburg, 9). The neglecting parents are not responsive and set no rules or standards for the child to follow. “The authoritarian style is characterized by detached, controlling parental behaviors” (Haslett and Samter, 172). These are the types of parents who are more likely to push their child into language acquisition. They set goals that are unrealistic for a child to reach. When the child does not reach the goal set, the parent is likely to belittle the child and give them an attitude of ‘I can’t do it.’ This effect can cause children to have a low self-esteem and difficulty interacting with peers (Haslett and Sampter, 172).

When children are pushed into learning things too soon or too quickly, this may cause a negative reaction. “The loss of free time for kids creates a loss of imagination and creativity” (News Channel 9, 1). The parents who push their children do not realize that they are hurting the creativity and imagination of their children. When a child enters preschool, legos, beads, and duplos are used and play an important part in the curriculum (Otto, 187). Language goals for this area are helping children learn to describe, name, and how they built their object (Otto, 187). When the parent pushes a child into language acquisition, the child may get frustrated with the process of building. The child will not be as creative when they name their object, or they may refuse to name the object. Another area that helps develop the language is drama corner in preschool. This helps children use language to communicate and converse in their role-playing (Otto, 188). The parents who push their children do not realize that they are hurting the imagination of their children. When the child plays, they use their language skills to communicate with their teachers and other children. Children may not interact as well as their peers if their parent pushed the child.

When children's parents make too many activities for the child throughout the day, the child may become burnout to the various activities. "This becomes 'over-programming' if the child never has a chance to manage his or her time or if the child does not really enjoy what he or she is doing," says Judy Myers-Walls, an associate professor in child development and family studies at Purdue University (News Channel 9, 1). Parents who push their children tend to overdue the child's day. They plan the day how they want it to be. They do not take the child's opinion into consideration. The child then becomes overwhelmed with activities and things to do, that s/he gets tired and easily frustrated with the task at hand. I know that I like to have certain things planned to do during the day, but I let my son choose the other things that he would like to do. If I planned every aspect of my day and my son's day, I would be overwhelmed with all the things that we had to do. It is best for parents to meet in the middle with their child and both plan the different activities that they will accomplish during the day.

There are various activities that parents can use to enhance their child's speech are various board games, computer games that are directed towards young children, and word games. These activities are okay to use, but only when they are used in moderation. When a parent makes a child sit at a computer and play a game until the child has mastered a level or area of knowledge, like the alphabet, it can be damaging to the child. The only thing that the child is learning is how demanding the parent is. The child may no longer see how fun learning activities can be. My son loves to play on the computer. He has a Winnie the Pooh game that helps him learn different concepts, such as, music and sharing. It is only used as a special privilege. If I made him sit at the computer until he mastered a level, he would become irritated and annoyed. He would also never want to play the game. Parents should make learning as fun as possible, so the child actually wants to learn new things.

My neighbor, who was a good friend of my brother, was accepted into a school for kids who were smart in math and science. His parents pushed him into going to this school. They thought that it would be great education for him in the long run. The boy graduated from this school, but instead of going on to college, he resented everything that he learned. He left home, and went to live in a commune. He did not have a job, and did not want to use his knowledge for the good of others. This is an extreme case of a parenting pushing a child, but these instances really do happen.

Children acquire a first language through several steps or stages. The first stage is crying. The second stage is babbling and then language progresses to one word sentences. The next stage is two word sentences, and after that a child can speak four to six word sentences. The last stage is when a child can hold a conversation with an adult and use detailed complex sentences. The steps can vary from each child. One may learn at a different pace than another. All children learn how to communicate in one language or another. The steps that a child learns the language through are greatly effected by the parent that s/he has. There are many things that a parent can do to help enhance the process of learning the language. Activities to help enhance a child's use of the language can vary from word games to computer games. As long as these activities are used in moderation, parents can feel comfortable playing them with their child. Some parents believe that making their child into a genius at an early age is good. The thing that many of these parents do not realize is that they are pushing their child into learning too quickly. The child may end up resenting language and other subjects throughout their

life. It is one danger that all parents need to realize before they make their child do something.