

■ Learning Through Play

Helping Language Grow

Listening, talking, playing — your child develops important language and pre-reading skills every day! Putting thoughts into words, acquiring new words to describe feelings and surroundings, and knowing that his or her thoughts and words are valued — this is just the beginning of a solid foundation for continued language success. Here are some things you can do with your toddler or preschooler to continue this very important development.



example, a two-year-old might say, "Mommy, out." You might respond by saying, "Jasmine, would you like to go outside with Mommy? Okay, let's go outside and play."

■ **Read aloud**

Get cozy in a comfortable, relaxed atmosphere, and play with words! Young children love to manipulate, repeat, rhyme, and create words, experimenting with sounds and meanings. Authors such as Dr. Seuss and Shel Sil-

verstein are fun to read and listen to. Pattern stories with repeating refrains and rhythms are easy to memorize and great fun to read together.

■ **Speak slowly and clearly**

Children need time to process words and information. When you speak to your child, look directly at him or her, pronouncing words in a clear voice, and sometimes repeating parts of a message. For example, you might say, "Isaac, it's time to go upstairs and take a nap. It's naptime."

■ **Discuss rather than ask**

Open-ended questions have no right or wrong answers. They ask for more than a "yes" or "no" response, giving a child opportunities to think, imagine, and be creative. Ask questions that begin with phrases such as, "What do you think?" and, "How do you feel?" and you will encourage your child to ponder and use descriptive language. For example, you might ask, "What would you like to do at home today?" Give your child plenty of time to elaborate on his or her answers, even when they move into pretend or fantasy ideas.

■ **Use language correctly**

Young children learn to speak by imitating the speech of those around them. Rather than saying, "Tara go night-night," you can say, "Tara, it's time for bed now."

■ **Encourage pretend play**

As children interact with others, they express feelings which, in turn, facilitate language growth. By offering your child opportunities to play with others and play alone, you let language development happen naturally.

■ **Listen attentively**

Show your child you respect his or her thoughts and words by bending down to listen, looking directly in his or her eyes. Allow time for your child to complete his or her thoughts without interrupting or offering to finish sentences.

■ **Accept speech irregularities**

Lisps, stammers, and elongated first-consonant sounds are often normal aspects of language development. Try not to call attention to any irregularities in your child's speech. This can make him or her self-conscious and restrict speech experimentation. Listen closely, and if over several months you notice an increase, discuss it first with an early childhood professional who has experience with many children your child's age. He or she can share information on normal speech patterns and, if necessary, steer you toward speech professionals.

■ **Sing together!**

With an older preschooler, talk about the meaning of lyrics and even draw pictures of what the song is about. Do fingerplays, too, because acting out words aids understanding. For example, when a child says, "The eensie, weensie spider crawled up the water spout," and uses his or her fingers to walk like a spider, the words *spider* and *up* become concrete and real.

■ **Help your child expand on his or her thoughts**

If you sense that your child is having difficulty explaining something, help expand on his or her words. For