

Talk to Me, Baby!
How You Can Support Young
Children's Language Development
Second Edition

by

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About the Author

Betty S. Bardige, Ed.D., has dedicated her career to assuring all children a promising start and a lifetime of equitable learning opportunities. As a developmental psychologist, educator, and parent, she knows that early experiences have unique power. Children who enjoy lots of rich, responsive, playful interaction with parents and caregivers develop emotional security, confidence, and increasingly rich language. As their language and knowledge grow, they ask ever more interesting questions and gain more from books, conversation, exploration, and play. Children whose language lags can fall further and further behind without extra supports.

Dr. Bardige's professional work has focused on those critical early years when children build foundations for relationships, resilience, and lifelong learning. A passionate and prolific writer and speaker, she collaborates with local and statewide initiatives to help parents, early educators, and engaged communities support young children's language, literacy, and social-emotional development.

As an activist, consultant, and foundation leader, Dr. Bardige has worked for more than 30 years to strengthen systems, programs, and policies that affect young children and their families. She chairs the Brazelton Touchpoints Foundation board, and is a member of the A.L. Mailman Family Foundation board. She has worked with educational and family-serving organizations on program development, evaluation, curriculum, and strategic planning, and has served on boards of local, state, and national organizations, including Smart from the Start, The National Association for Family Child Care, and Facing History and Ourselves. Her nonprofit work fuels her passions and expertise.

Dr. Bardige holds a doctorate in human development from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. She is the author of *At a Loss for Words* (Temple University Press, 2005), coauthor of *Building Literacy with Love* and *Poems to Learn to Read By* (with Marilyn Segal, ZERO TO THREE Press, 2005), and a contributing writer to ZERO TO THREE's *Caring for Infants and Toddlers in Groups: Developmentally Appropriate Practice, Second Edition* (2008). She can be reached through her web site, awealthofwords.com, her Language-Building Tips Facebook page, or at bettybardige@gmail.com.



Off Like a Rocket

(1½–3½ Years)

Doctor (to mother): “You’ve got a very healthy toddler, and she seems to be developing just fine. But I’m wondering how her language is coming. She hasn’t said a thing during this whole examination. Does she talk much at home?”

Toddler: “I can talk. You’re a pediatrician.”

At some point between the ages of 1 and 2½, toddlers figure out how to put words together, and their language takes off. They become hungry for words, constantly asking, “Whazzat?” and repeating new words they hear. Each day—and often many times a day—they amaze their teachers and parents with new words, clever observations and questions, and stories of past events that the adults may have forgotten.

Hart and Risley (1995) traced 42 children's growing vocabularies from their first words until their third birthdays and graphed the averages for children of different socioeconomic backgrounds (see Figure 4.1). As the graph reveals, word-learning pace accelerated for all groups in the period between 16 and 24 months, though faster for some than for others. When Hart and Risley reexamined their play talk data, they concluded that it was the richness of communication, not the child's family background, that made the difference (Risley & Hart, 2006; Weisleder & Fernald, 2013).

Once children begin to use words as a primary means of communication, their vocabularies build rapidly. Children's growing communication ability enables them to converse more fluently, giving them more language-learning opportunities. As children become more adept at processing language, they learn words more quickly from books and conversation. Their increasingly sophisticated speech elicits richer responses from adults, introducing more words, concepts, and information.

At the same time that their language development is zooming ahead, children are developing a new sense of themselves as individuals who can express opinions, make choices, and do things all by themselves. For some families, the period between about

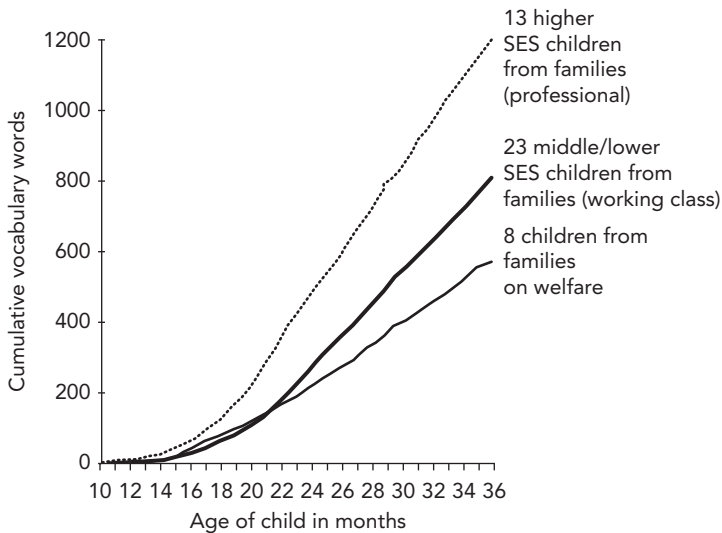


Figure 4.1. The widening gap in young children's vocabularies from professional, working-class, and welfare families across their first 3 years of life. (From Hart, B., & Risley, T.R. [1995, p. 47].) (Key: SES, socioeconomic status.)

18 months and almost 3 years is the time of the “terrible twos,” when a child’s need to assert his identity keeps the whole family on edge. “No,” “Mine,” and “Me do it” dominate the toddler’s side of many conversations, and temper tantrums are a common—though not always predictable—occurrence.

For other families, this is the most wondrous period of child development, when their baby truly “becomes a person.” Each day is filled with surprises as the child picks up new words, puts them together in new ways, and says and does a myriad of things that show unexpected insight, empathy, and creativity. In most families, of course, the twos are occasionally “terrible” and often “terrific”—the one constant is that the children keep their parents and teachers on their toes.

The amazing, if sometimes rocky or “testing,” period when language growth takes off is also a time when the language input that children receive and the practice it stimulates really matter. The amount of talk; the use of rare and interesting words; the exchange of information through open-ended questions or comments that expand on a child’s simple observation; the use of books and photographs as springboards for conversation; and the use of positive, proactive, playful discipline all make a difference to a child’s language learning. Because 1- and 2-year-olds are doing most of their talking with adults (rather than with friends, toys, themselves, and the imaginary conversation partners they will later be able to create), what parents and caregivers do to elicit and enrich conversation and support healthy social-emotional development has both immediate and long-term impact.

A mother of a 2-year-old explained after participating in a literacy workshop, “In my home country, I didn’t talk to my child. My place in the family was to cook and clean; my in-laws did all the talking. Now I know how important it is for me to talk to her. My in-laws aren’t here. I can’t read her stories, but we can look at a book together and talk about the pictures. In our home country, she was told not to ask questions. But here? Here I see that she will need to learn to ask questions, just as I will.”

During this period, everybody counts. When parents are providing rich language experiences, the quality of a child care setting

can still make a difference. When the child care program is full of interesting things to talk about and many opportunities to talk with interested adults, what parents and other family members do to support and encourage conversation still matters. When talkative, solicitous mothers are engaging toddlers in many conversations, father talk still adds value (Pancosfar & Vernon-Feagins, 2006). Indeed, when mothers tend to keep a conversation focused on a child's interests, fathers who ask more challenging questions (Leech et al., 2013) or talk about their own work or hobbies with their 2-year-olds add an important dimension.

Each adult contributes in his own way: by listening to the child and getting her to talk, by interjecting humor or asking *wh*- questions, by telling special stories or engaging in pretend play, by sharing information or just chatting, and by giving the child opportunities to hear and use one or more languages. Results can be long lasting. In one study, for example, low-income fathers' use of rich, responsive language as they played, read, sang, and told stories with their 2-year-olds predicted higher math and reading scores when the children were in fifth grade (McFadden, Tamis-LeMonda, & Cabrera, 2011)!

For 2-year-olds, hearing rich and varied vocabulary (including some rare and unusual words) in conversations with adults is a major promoter of language development. At this stage, richness may be more important than other factors, such as the amount of talk by either adults or children or the use of gestures or storytelling (Rowe, 2012). Language that is richer in interesting and specific vocabulary, descriptive words, and varied sentence forms offers more for toddlers to imitate. Hart and Risley identified these richer elements in play talk; they are also characteristic of well-written toddler books.

Child-focused talk is likely to be richer when adults use languages with toddlers in which they themselves are comfortably fluent. This is true for parents as well as for teachers. For example, a study that followed Spanish-speaking English language learners from age 2 to 4 found that parents' use of English in the home only predicted stronger English vocabulary for children when at least one parent spoke English well. When both parents were predominantly Spanish speakers, their use of the English they were learning did not help their toddlers learn English words more quickly (Hoff et al., 2014). Toddler teachers who are dual language learners can share the rich vocabulary and phrasing they naturally use

in their preferred language(s)—whether or not they also speak with children in a language in which they are not yet fully fluent themselves.

FROM WORDS TO TELEGRAPHIC SPEECH TO SENTENCES

It is important to look beyond vocabulary in order to understand children's suddenly rapid acquisition of language. Children are not just learning words. They are also learning how to combine words into meaningful phrases and sentences; how to add markers to words that indicate how they are used (e.g., *word + s = words*; *use + d = used*); how to form new words from known words and word parts (e.g., *lunch + box = lunchbox*; *meaning + ful = meaningful*); and how to use sequences of words to ask questions, issue commands, and tell stories. At the same time, they are learning their culture's largely unspoken rules about when to talk and when to listen, how children talk to adults and peers, and what is appropriate to say in particular situations.

Children's first word combinations have a grammar of their own. Word order tends to be similar to fully formed sentences, but past tense and plural endings, articles such as *the*, and other grammatical markers are often left out, along with pronouns such as *I* and *you* and connecting words such as *are* or *did*. Children often ask questions with rising intonation but not in special forms, and most "sentences" are only two or three words long. Like 20th century telegram writers, these toddlers include only the essentials.

As children learn more and more of the implicit rules that govern fillers, placement, and usage, their sentences become longer. "Mommy?" becomes "Where Mommy go?" and then "Where did Mommy go?" In addition to filling in the elements that the rules of their grammar require, children add descriptive words to phrases and combine phrases to create longer sentences. Vocabulary and syntax (grammar) bootstrap each other. Sentence structures provide clues as to what new words may mean, just as knowing more words helps children to understand longer sentences and master more complex sentence forms (see Konishi et al., 2014, at <http://www.bilingualism.northwestern.edu/bilingualism-psycholinguistics/files/Freeman2014.pdf>).

“Mommy coming home,” says 2-year-old Delilah, whenever she hears her mother’s car enter the driveway.

At 2½, Delilah is much more precise:

Grandmother: I hear Mommy’s car in the driveway. Mommy is coming home.

Delilah: No, Nana. Mommy is ALREADY home.

Dialects, both standard and nonstandard, are governed by rules of pronunciation, word formation, and grammar. Toddlers will learn the rules that characterize the dialect they hear in everyday conversations, even if they are hearing a different dialect on television or in occasional educational settings such as library story hours. Traveling in a wider social orbit, adults are more likely to shift between dialects as the situation demands. Fluent adult speakers of African American Vernacular English, for example, may routinely use sentences such as “He run slow” and “That Damitra book,” when talking with family and friends, although they may also use the Standard English forms in more formal contexts.

Just as certain sounds may be ignored by children whose first languages don’t contain them, the standard dialect’s grammatical markers such as the *-s* on a singular verb or the *'s* on a possessive noun will be ignored by toddlers who are learning to speak a dialect that marks these grammatical relationships in other ways or not at all. Instead, these children will gradually learn to add the words, endings, and other markers that are important in their primary dialect.

The quality of children’s language experience may affect the speed at which they master the basics of sentence formation, but it rarely derails their ultimate achievement. Almost all children will learn to speak grammatically (according to the usage rules of their linguistic communities) by the time they are 4 or 5 years old (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000). Groups of children who have never heard a fully developed language have often invented one.

- Children whose parents spoke pidgin languages (proto-languages that combine elements of two or more languages and are likely to sound like telegraphic speech to speakers of either one) developed creoles (blended languages with their own grammatical rules and markers) within a generation.

-
- Deaf children who had not had the opportunity to learn sign language and used only simple “home sign” gestures with their parents collectively developed true sign languages in residential schools.

Children who are learning two languages simultaneously will go through the same developmental phases in each, moving from single words to two- and three-word combinations to telegraphic speech and eventually to fully grammatical sentences. Those whose families, teachers, and playmates code-mix—using two languages interchangeably (often within the same utterance)—will do so as well. They will use the grammatically appropriate word order for phrases in each language and gradually add the appropriate grammatical markers. Unlike many individuals who learn a second language later in life, those who learn two languages as toddlers will process the grammatical markers and function words for both languages in the same areas of their brains (Kim et al., 1997).

Researchers describe grammar as a robust capacity because its development is hard to disrupt. Only children with rare genetic disorders or severe conditions that make them unable to communicate with either words or signs fail to develop this aspect of language (National Research Council & Institute of Medicine, 2000).

Tips for Talking with Toddlers and Twos

- Watch the toddler at play, wait to see what she will do, and ask yourself what she is trying to accomplish. What story is she telling? What is she trying to discover or figure out? What is she trying to communicate by her behavior?
- Find a way to enter the child’s play world. You might play beside him and then link your play to his, make a comment or ask a question about what he is doing, or talk to or for a toy that he is using as a pretend companion.
- Talk about anything that interests the child—or that interests you.
- Name objects and parts of objects for the toddler, and explain their uses and relationships. “Let’s tighten the strap on your shoe. Can you push it down so the Velcro will stick?”

(continued)

Tips for Talking with Toddlers and Twos *(continued)*

- Acknowledge the toddler's contributions to the conversation, then build on them by adding more information or asking a related question.
- Expand telegraphic speech into natural sounding sentences. Don't just repeat what the child is saying; rather, add a bit more to spark her response.
- Don't correct grammar or pronunciation. Respond to what the child meant to say rather than to how he said it.
- If you are not sure of what the child said or meant, ask her to repeat it. If it is still not clear, you might put your best guess into words or ask her to show you. If you just pretend to understand, you may miss the opportunity for a genuine exchange.
- Remember that even 2-year-olds who can use full sentences may still be learning how to carry on conversations. Be flexible and patient when the child responds with silence, abruptly changes the subject, or chatters on without regard to your responses.
- Use specific language, including some unusual, interesting words; onomatopoeic words (words that sound like their meanings); and other words that are fun to repeat.
- Ask questions that offer choices (e.g., "Would you like to put your coat on yourself or should I help you?"), support problem solving (e.g., "Do you think we could reach the ball with this, or do we need something longer?"), solicit ideas and opinions (e.g., "What flavor would you like? What should we get for Mommy?"), extend the child's pretend play (e.g., "Where is this train going?"), or prompt investigation (e.g., "What do you think would happen if...?").
- Use fanciful language and playful approaches to add interest to ordinary routines. "Hey, hand. Are you hiding in that sleeve? Come out, come out wherever you are!" "Shh. The fairies are sleeping."
- Wonder with children. "What do you think made this hole in the ground?"
- Think out loud. "The sky is dark and gray. I think it might rain. We better put on our boots and raincoats so we can splash in the puddles."

Tips for Talking with Toddlers and Twos *(continued)*

- Don't monopolize the conversation. Give the child many chances to chime in, and stop when he loses interest.
- TALK—AND LISTEN—A LOT!

Vocabulary, verbal flair, and functional use of language are much more variable. Children who are read to a lot or who hear poetic language in nursery rhymes and bedtime stories are likely to learn unusual words and phrasings and to incorporate these into their own stories, patter, and pretend play. Children who spend a lot of time talking and playing with adults who encourage and try to satisfy their curiosity are likely to comment on interesting or unusual events, ask all sorts of questions, and offer their own explanations for things they observe or learn about. Children who frequently hear and practice polite greetings, requests, invitations to join in play, and other ways of initiating or interrupting a conversation become adept at social routines. This helps them to be comfortable with new people and to make friends easily. Children who have many, many opportunities to engage with adults in recalling experiences and making up fanciful stories will learn to use their words to weave narratives of their own. As all of these children learn to hook adults into telling them stories, joining their play, and answering their questions, they will get still more language-learning opportunities.

Many people think that the best way to talk to young children is to use only short sentences and simple words. They may not realize how much little children love big words—both because they are hard but fun to say and because people are impressed when they use them. Longer sentences are likely to contain more interesting words, along with more contextual clues to their probable meanings. And, of course, interesting words—when used naturally in meaningful contexts—stretch vocabularies.

The trick is to build on what the child knows and is curious about, not to bombard her with esoteric vocabulary words that have little connection with her interests or experience. So much is new for 1- and 2-year-olds that almost any discussion or explanation or shared fantasy play is likely to introduce new words and concepts.

Watch, wait, and wonder—then find a way to join the play.

FROM THINKING OUT LOUD TO INNER SPEECH

Two-year-old Andre used his new words to remind himself how to stay out of trouble. “Mama papers. Don’t touch.” Betty, an early talker and late walker, gave herself instructions as she mastered walking: “One foot, the other foot.” Chandra recited her father’s reassurances over and over to comfort herself when he left her at her child care center. “Daddy come back. Daddy come back SOON.” Darrel told himself how to fix everyday problems. “Uh-oh. Milk pill. Need ponge.” Elena accompanied her doll play with a running narrative. “Here bankie. Night-night. Wake up. Get bottle. Night-night.”

Language provides toddlers with a powerful new tool for organizing their behavior—they can use language to give themselves instructions, repeat a comforting mantra, or state a simple plan. Sometimes it seems as if toddlers are driven to talk—even when no one is listening. Language researchers who taped young children’s nighttime talk were surprised at how much time these newly verbal children spent practicing words, phrases, and telegraphic sentences (Brown, 1973; Nelson, 1989).

By age 3, most children have learned how to keep a conversation going—if they choose to—and how to carry on a conversation without a partner’s help. They will talk to and for a puppet or doll, begin a conversation by asking a question or making an announcement, and even talk to their hands or feet if there’s nothing to play with and no one is listening.

Three-year-olds also talk to themselves. When faced with a problem, they can frame the question, state a guess or hypothesis, or give themselves step-by-step directions. They will repeat and memorize a short list of items or instructions or a fragment of a favorite song, poem, or story. Although much of their self-talk is spoken or whispered, they are also developing a capacity for inner speech. They can use their words not only to communicate but also to think silently—to reflect and plan, reason and synthesize, wonder and imagine.

Most 2-year-olds are just beginning to develop the ability to use language in these ways. They rely on partners to support and encourage their thinking by offering questions, information, and extensions of their ideas.

Consider the following two conversations:

Andrew: "Here comes the big truck. Watch out everybody, big truck coming."

Father: "Sorry big truck, you have to slow down. You are coming to the tollgate. Here's your ticket, Mr. Truck Driver."

Andrew: "Thank you, Mr. Man. Zoom...zoom, going up the mountain. Oops, flat tire."

Father: "Hmmm...that flat tire looks pretty serious. We'd better find the jack and jack up your truck."

Andrew: "Here's the jack. Fix the tire."

Father: "Let's hurry. Looks as if you've got ice cream in your truck. We don't want it to melt."

Andrew: "Yeah—got lots of ice cream and chocolate ice cream, strawberry and more ice cream."

Father: "You're making me hungry. How about giving me an ice cream sandwich while we repair this flat tire." (Segal & Adcock, 1985, p. 127)

Child: "Here comes the big truck. Watch out everybody, big truck coming."

Adult: "Where is the big truck going?"

Child: "Up the mountain."

Adult: "What's up on the mountain?"

Child: "Trees."

Adult: "What's the truck going to do?"

Child: "Zoom...zoom."

Adult: "Where's the truck going now?"

Child: "Zoom...zoom."

In the first conversation, the adult knows the child well and responds to both his words and his enthusiasm. Following the child's lead, he continually adds a bit more in ways that hold the child's interest. The conversation flows easily, with each exchange building on the previous one. Child psychiatrist Stanley Greenspan, who worked with children with autism spectrum disorder and other communication challenges, described such conversations in terms of interlocking "circles of communication" (Greenspan & Salmon, 1996). Each new idea, question, or comment opens a communication circle, which each response closes or completes. The circles form an interlocking chain when each response invites a related response.

In the second conversation, the circles don't interlock, and some are not even completed. The child is dependent on the adult to keep the conversation going, but the adult's attempts are less successful than in the first example. The child's limited verbal facility is only part of the issue. The disconnects occur when the adult's questions fail to engage the child, and, as a result, the child's responses give the adult very little to build on. Instead of a discussion or playful game, the conversation feels like a quiz.

TWO-YEAR-OLD LOGIC

As a first child of older parents, James was used to getting his way. When his mother weaned him shortly before his second birthday, he soon tired of being a "big boy" and insisted on being nursed. His mother patiently explained that she had no more milk for him; her breasts were empty. But, with impeccable toddler logic, James had a ready solution: "Go to store. Buy milk. Fill up Mommy."

A few days later, James went with his child care class on a field trip to the fire station. He was particularly interested in the fire axe that was hanging high up on the wall. "Whazzat?" he asked his teacher.

"It's a fire axe," she explained. "Sometimes, the firefighters have to break down a door so they can get to a fire. This axe is the tool they use."

"See axe," James demanded.

"You can look at it from here," his teacher responded, "but I can't get it down for you."

The solution was obvious to James. "Tell fireman get ladder. Climb up. Get axe."

"Say good-bye to your Obaasan now," 2-year old Yoshi's mother insisted as Yoshi continued to Skype with his grandmother. "We have to go shopping to get food for dinner. You can't stay here by yourself."

"You go shopping," Yoshi responded. "I stay with Oba."

Carly, age 2½, is busy arranging rubber animals in block enclosures.

"What are you building?" her teacher asks.

"A zoo." Carly answers brightly. "I'm making playpens for the animals so they can play together."

"And who is in this pen?"

"Rhinoceros and stegosaurus and triceratops. They're friends. And a cow and a giraffe."

Knowing that Carly loves dinosaurs, both as toys and in books, her teacher is curious about the thinking behind Carly's arrangement.

"I thought stegosaurus and triceratops were dinosaurs."

"Um-hmm."

"Could we see dinosaurs in a real zoo?"

"Um-hmm."

"I thought you told me dinosaurs were extinct."

"No more dinosaurs hanging on the brink," Carly chants, quoting from one of her favorite books, *Ten Little Dinosaurs* (Schnetzler & Harris, 2000). "They all disappeared in a geologic wink.... Poor little dinosaurs, all extinct."

"Where did all those poor little dinosaurs go?"

"To the zoo."

"Look at my shell, Abuelita," said Dmitri in Spanish, the language he uses with his father and paternal grandmother. He proudly held up the snail shell that he had found on a walk with his other grandmother, who speaks with him in Russian, as does his mother.

"What a beautiful shell," Dmitri's grandmother replied. "Do you know that an animal once lived in it?"

"Yes, yes." Dmitri responded. "A snail."

"Can you show me how a snail moves?" his grandmother asked, using a Spanish word that can also mean walk.

"No, Abuelita," Dmitri said with puzzled frown. "Snails can't walk. They don't have feet."

“Oh,” his grandmother said. “Do they slide?” Dmitri looked even more puzzled. “Like on the playground? No, Abuelita. No, no, no!”

Later, Dmitri’s mother explained. In Russian, snails neither stride nor slide. They glide.

As toddlers like James, Yoshi, Carly, and Dmitri master language, they learn to string together not just words, but ideas. They notice likes and differences and use words to make links between disparate objects that share functions, names, or key characteristics. They can follow—and give—multistep directions. Their logic may be their own, but the steps are in order and the ideas connect.

SUPPORTING STEP-BY-STEP THINKING AND PROBLEM SOLVING

Waking from her nap, baby Moni began to howl. Two-year-old Rafe, who was playing near her crib, was the first to respond. He tried to give her one of his toys, but she only howled louder.

“Stop crying, Moni!” Rafe ordered, putting his hands over his ears. “Wan me poke you eye?”

By then, their teacher had arrived. She quickly scooped up Moni and patted her back to comfort her. Moni continued to fuss as the teacher turned to Rafe. Instead of chastising him, she helped him think through the problem. “Why is baby Moni crying?”

“Sad,” Rafe replied, with a look of concern.

“Why do you think she’s sad?”

Rafe looked at Moni and then at his teacher. “No paci. I find it.”

Thinking through problems step by step can be a challenge for young toddlers, especially when they are feeling overwhelmed, frustrated, or in a hurry to get what they want. Sometimes all they need is a bit of adult support, as Rafe did, to break a problem into manageable pieces. By *scaffolding*, or supporting, his thinking, Rafe’s teacher enabled him to experience the joy of solving the problem himself and the pride of being a helpful friend to a younger child.

Many of the songs, books, hand and finger rhymes, and spontaneous stories that adults share with toddlers help them practice step-by-step thinking.

The Itsy-Bitsy Spider

The Itsy-Bitsy Spider went up the water spout.
Down came the rain and washed the spider out.
Out came the sun and dried up all the rain,
So the Itsy-Bitsy Spider went up the spout again.

With a little creativity, adults can adapt traditional songs to help toddlers remember multiple steps and reinforce causal links.

This Is the Way We Wash Our Hands (variation)

This is the way we wet our hands, wet our hands, wet our hands.
This is the way we put on the soap
To make a lot of soap suds.

This the way we rub our hands, rub the fronts, rub the backs.
This is the way we rub our fingers
And cover our hands with soap suds.

This is the way we scrub off the dirt, scrub off the dirt, scrub off the dirt.
This is the way we scrub off the dirt
With lots of bubbly soap suds.

This is the way we rinse off the soap, rinse off the soap, rinse off
the soap.

This is the way we turn off the tap.
'Cause now our hands are all clean.

When adults wonder aloud about whether it will rain, why the sky is dark, or what they need to bring along on an outing, they invite children to think with them. This gives adults an opportunity to evoke and extend the children's logic and also to model theirs. Even the simplest plans, when shared with a toddler, become opportunities to build language and reasoning skills.

ADVANCES IN PRETEND PLAY AND IMAGINATION

Visiting their cousins for a birthday celebration, the not-quite 2-year-old twins, Hannah and Ramsey, were very excited. The whole family had gathered and, as the youngest ones, they were the center of attention. Their older cousin had a dollhouse with

furniture, and she showed them how to open the toy oven's door. Soon, Hannah was busy making pretend cookies and serving them to everyone except her sister, who had found a set of trucks and was busily driving them "all around the town." As Hannah served each adult in turn, they all played along, commenting on how delicious the cookies were, thanking Hannah profusely, and asking for more. Ramsey waited until Hannah's back was turned, then quietly snuck over to the dollhouse and ate an entire batch of pretend cookies, one yummy bite at a time.

Just as they are learning to combine words and sequence ideas in conversations, 2-year-olds are learning to string together multiple steps in their pretend play. They will pick up a toy telephone, say, "Hello," jabber for a bit, then say, "Bye," and hang up. They will load a toy truck with sand or blocks, drive it around, deliver its contents to a new location, and drive it back to its garage. No longer content just to eat a pretend cookie, they will now go on a pretend shopping trip and unpack their play food, bake invisible cookies in a toy oven, and enjoy an imaginary tea party with an adult companion or even with a friend. Favorite sequences will be played out over and over again.

Many toddlers come to associate particular play routines with particular places or people. At the library, for example, they greet the gerbil, then get a book and "read" it to their stuffed rabbit. At the park, they climb on the toy train, shout, "All aboard!" and drive to the zoo where they visit the giraffe. At the pediatric clinic, they make spaghetti on the play stove while they wait for the doctor. When Aunt Carrie comes to babysit, they get out the toy farm and make the farmer give each animal a big serving of hay.

Just as language helps toddlers to organize their own behavior, it can help them play together. For 2-year-olds, playing together usually means doing the same thing or following a leader's direction. One child calls, "Monster gonna get us. Run fast!!" and everyone runs. Or a child invites a friend to help build a tall castle. "Get more bricks," and his friend happily complies. As they approach 3, children learn to play complementary roles, such as doctor and patient, waiter and diner, store clerk and shopper, or parent and child.

At first, toddlers will play out the salient parts of a process, repeating those that are most fun to act out, regardless of real-world constraints. They might, for example, pass out imaginary cookies,

pour some imaginary tea, and then eat their own cookies, although they never took any. They are not likely to mind if their playmates take a drink before their cups are filled or after their tea has been declared, “All gone.”

With practice, 2-year-olds become adept pretenders. The shopping excursion that once involved picking up an old purse and walking around the room while repeating, “Goin shopping,” now requires car keys and a shopping list, a bag or cart to fill with groceries, and a doll or human to collect the money. Whereas Teddy Bear’s doctor visit once involved a silent listen with the stethoscope and a shot or two followed by Teddy Bear crying and being comforted, he now needs a thorough exam and a full explanation of why shots are necessary.

Pretending with a 2-year-old or with a small toddler group is a wonderful way to enhance both vocabulary and functional language use. Adults can get involved in many ways:

- *Set the stage and supply props:* A box can serve as a table, stove, or store counter or be opened and turned on its side to make a dollhouse, a barn, or a garage. A dress-up collection—with scarves, hats, costume jewelry, ties, vests, capes, shoes, purses or briefcases, and boots—can support everything from going to work to being butterflies, firefighters, or dinosaurs. You can also create theme boxes with collections of props such as party hats, cards, and candles for a birthday party; plastic bandages, empty plastic bottles, and a toy stethoscope for a doctor or veterinarian visit; pails, shovels, shells, and a towel for going to the beach; and impromptu collections that relate to a child’s interests, upcoming or past experiences, or favorite storybooks.
- *Initiate the play:* Call the child on a pretend telephone, invite her on a pretend trip to the beach or the grocery store, turn an ordinary cleanup chore into a game of basketball or a race to get the cars to their garages, or ask what her doll would like for breakfast.
- *Ask a question or make a comment that helps children put words to their play:* “Oh, no. Snoopy fell down. Did he hurt his knee? Does he need a Band-Aid?”
- *Follow the child’s directions:* Get the things she asks for, eat the food she serves, and clap and cheer for the performances that

she asks you to watch. When the directions are nonverbal, put them into words as you comply.

- *Take on a subordinate role:* Be the baby, patient, passenger, or customer, and let a child (or two or three children) care for, boss, or serve you. As you play your role, encourage the child to do most of the speaking.
- *Add a bit more to the child's game:* Play your role with enthusiasm, and take the action one step further. Ask for some cheese to sprinkle on the delicious pasta, hand the conductor your ticket to stamp, point out the stellar sights as you zoom through space, or ask if the camel is thirsty or if the car needs some gas.
- *Inject humor:* "I know what this spaghetti needs! Do you have any chocolate sprinkles?" "I'm glad you're going shopping. We need eggs, bread, and dinosaur food."
- *Help children pretend together:* You might suggest a cooperative task such as making dinner together for the dinosaur family, putting on a puppet show, or using a long hose or bucket brigade to put out an imaginary fire.

When adults join 2-year-olds in pretending, both child and adult are likely to use richer and more complex language than in other kinds of play and to link events into a narrative. These experiences build essential language skills for all children and may be particularly helpful to children whose language lags (Demir et al., 2015).

MONSTERS THAT LURK IN THE DARK

Fascinated by the tadpoles in a pond she was visiting with her parents, 2-year-old Nora leaned over too far and fell in. Her father rescued her quickly, but the experience was still frightening. "Don't like dark water," Nora kept repeating. "Nora scared."

Nora still seemed upset when her mother shared the story with their home visitor the next week. "How can I help her?" Nora's mother asked. "I don't want her to be afraid of the water."

"Try replaying the story with her at bath time," the home visitor suggested. "Show her how to make a Nora doll fall in the water and have a daddy doll rescue her. Make the Nora doll cry or say

that she is scared, and have the daddy doll comfort her. Then give Nora a chance to play Nora or to play the daddy. After a while, you can extend the story. Have the daddy and Nora dolls go for a happy swim—just like the tadpoles—but with their heads above water!”

Nora’s mom followed this advice and found that Nora loved the game. Soon the Nora doll was happily swimming with Froggy and Rubber Ducky and even diving under the “dark water.” By the next summer, when Nora started taking swimming lessons at the local YMCA, she had forgotten the trauma.

A 2-year-old’s ability to connect ideas and imagine what might happen can lead to new fears. The memory of a frightening or painful experience can make a child reluctant to go to a particular place or even one that is similar. A dark room may suddenly be home to nameless terrors; imaginary monsters may lurk in a closet or under a bed. A child may worry that the cow will jump over the moon and come crashing through her bedroom ceiling, that the sweat that runs down her body on a hot day is a sign that she is melting like an ice cream cone, or that she will be sucked down the bathtub drain along with the soap bubbles.

Language can enhance fears, but it can also help alleviate them. A child who can say, “Go away, big green monster” (Emberley, 1992); tell a friend that “There aren’t any real lions around here, only in the zoo”; or explain to his parents why he is worried about going to a friend’s house all by himself has developed important coping skills.

ADVANCES IN STORYTELLING AND RETELLING

Nicholas was 2½ when his father took him to his first movie. Nicholas didn’t understand it all, but he was entranced with the larger-than-life cartoon characters, the music, and the crowd of children and parents. On the way home, his Dad helped him to review the story and rehearse what he would tell his mother. Nicholas condensed it to its core. “Pinocchio tell a lie. Pinocchio nose grow.” (As he said this, Nicholas put his hand on his nose and then stretched out his arm to indicate how long the nose had grown.) “Pinocchio tell de troof.” (On “troof,” Nicholas quickly bent his arm and hit his nose to indicate that it had returned to its regular size.) Nicholas

was so delighted with his mother's response that, for the next several days, he repeated this performance whenever anyone came into the house.

Children like Nicholas are beginning to understand that actions have purposes and consequences. The stories they tell or retell are not just a series of observations or unrelated events. One thing follows from another. Although there may be gaps in the action or logical impossibilities, there is an emerging sense of sequence. Children at this age are starting to realize that most stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end. Those who have been read to a lot or who hear many family stories often pick up the literary conventions that mark a story's beginning or ending.

"When I was a born baby..." 2½-year-old Sam would frequently begin, before prompting his mother to retell his favorite story about how his big brother had slipped while carrying him down the stairs but managed to keep him safe (Engel, 1997).

When Jason and his mother used miniature figures to retell a story from one of his favorite books, Jason added an ending of his own. "So they put on their hats and their mittens and went outside to play Kooshball."

At this point in development, children especially like to hear stories about themselves. They enjoy retellings of events they remember and also like to hear about when they were little babies. A baby book or family scrapbook provides treasured opportunities to retell such stories and talk together about all the ways in which a child is growing up and all the new things she can do. With a little help, children can put three or four pictures of a recent event in order and use them to tell a story. "Me and Rashid got lots of blocks. We made a big, big castle. Then the truck came and knocked it down. CRASH!"

Many toddlers like to take small family photo albums to child care to talk about with their teachers and look over at naptime. Home-school journals, in which both parents and providers can make notes about a child's experiences and accomplishments,

are another way that parents and teachers can keep each other informed about the stories that toddlers may want to hear or want help in telling.

For toddlers and also for preschoolers, telling and retelling stories about the past builds both language and reasoning skills. Children and adults strengthen shared memories as they reminisce, deepening their relationships. And, of course, listening to, telling, and retelling stories build foundations for later literacy.

See *Supporting Older Toddlers' Learning* (Resources for Early Learning [n.d.]; http://www.resourcesforearlylearning.org/educators_pd/), a video-based module for education and care providers, for examples of educator-toddler conversations that go beyond the here and now and help children connect ideas as they plan, problem-solve, explain, investigate, pretend, and tell stories.

BOOKS AS SPRINGBOARDS FOR CONVERSATIONS

For the third time that day, Aileen agreed to the 2-year-olds' request to read *The Rainbow Goblins* (De Rico, 1994). It wasn't really a toddler book, but it was the children's favorite. The illustrations were gorgeous. The story as written was a bit violent, but the pictures were sufficiently ambiguous that Aileen could easily change the words. The book told the story of seven greedy goblins, each with his own color, who set out on a journey to eat the rainbow. They were supposed to be evil characters, but Aileen left that part out. Instead, she gave each goblin a unique voice and some unique gestures and sound effects to go with his unique color. She also used special voices to mark the highlights of the story—whispering for the secret plans, suspenseful for the impending thunderstorm, exaggerated slurps for gobbling the colors, awed at the rebirth of the rainbow—but the children did much of the reading and acting out by themselves.

"I wanna be Red," announced Alex. "I'm the leader. March. March. March. Everybody follow me."

Jody chimed in, "I'm Yellow. I'm the craftiest. What's crafty?" Each time Aileen read the story, the children found something new to imitate, retell, or ask about.

On their last home visit, Mandy had brought Jamal *Blueberries for Sal* (McClosky, 1948), which they read together. For today's visit, Mandy brought a set of blocks. Jamal, who had been reading *Blueberries for Sal* all week with his dad, chose the blue one. "I'm little Sal," he announced. "This is my blueberry. Kerplink!"

Books play many roles in the lives of 2-year-olds. They can be familiar friends, providing comfort and relaxation at bedtime or naptime, during times of stress or long waiting periods, or whenever a child needs a break for "refueling." Books are often sources of amusement or inspiration—and may give children like Jamal ideas for active and imaginative play that continues beyond the book.

Some books are filled with pictures of interesting things that toddlers love to name—all kinds of road-building machines, trains and planes, pretty flowers, sea creatures, or creepy-crawlers. As parents and teachers add more information about the pictures in the books, a child's curiosity is piqued and her expertise extended. She may want to see real-life examples, get other nonfiction books from the library, and incorporate her growing knowledge into pretend play routines.

The Books 2-Year-Olds Like Best...

- Have colorful illustrations that are easy to identify and talk about
- Feature characters who behave like 2-year-olds and share their feelings
- Often tell reassuring stories about characters who are lost and then found, who run away and return, or who misbehave and are forgiven
- Introduce interesting words
- Contain words and phrases that are fun to say, such as "Kerplink...kerplank...kerplunk" (*Blueberries for Sal* [McClosky, 1948]), "And the big thing just said 'Snort'" (*Are You My Mother?* [Eastman, 1960]), or "I do not like them, Sam-I-Am" (*Green Eggs and Ham* [Seuss, 1960b])
- Have distinctive covers so that children can find their favorites

The Books 2-Year-Olds Like Best... (continued)

- Have parts that children can imitate in pretend play
- May use literary language, such as “In the great, green room there was a telephone...” (*Goodnight Moon* [Brown, 2007]) or “And they went out together in the deep, deep snow” (*The Snowy Day* [Keats, 1962])
- Show many kinds of animals, sharks, dinosaurs, trucks, trains, houses, or members of other interesting categories
- Help children to be “experts” on favorite topics
- Have easy-to-follow patterns, sometimes with a twist at the end
- Often use literary conventions to mark the beginning (e.g., “Once upon a time”) and the ending (e.g., “Good night.”)

Some books are tailor-made for helping toddlers cope with strong feelings. *No, David!* (Shannon, 1998), a story about a child who is always getting into trouble and being told “No!”, captures this typical toddler experience—and gives children a chance to practice hearing and saying, “Yes, David!” Finicky eaters, and those who have recently learned to enjoy more varied foods, can relate to books such as *Eat Up, Gemma* (Hayes & Ormerod, 1994), *Bread and Jam for Francis* (Hoban, 1964), *Gregory the Terrible Eater* (Sharmat & Aruego, 1989), and *Eating the Alphabet* (Ehlert, 1994). Adults can read the stories in such books as they are written or can vary the story to feature an individual child’s name or to match her issues or attention span. Either way, books can help children put their own strong feelings into words and find ways to cope with the world’s demands that preserve their dignity and emerging sense of self.

Parents and teachers will find that different kinds of books lend themselves to different kinds of conversations. Some provide opportunities for toddlers to show off their knowledge or join in the fun of reading by chiming in with the refrains they know. Some lend themselves to questions that ask children to look closely, describe details, or make inferences about what a character is doing and why. Adults can expand children’s sentences and observations, acknowledging correct answers, adding a bit more, and correcting any misconceptions. “You’re right. That caterpillar doesn’t want any more food. His tummy is so full that it hurts!” “It looks like a horse, but

I think it's supposed to be a cow. See, here's its udder, where the milk comes out."

Many books provide opportunities to strengthen toddler logic by linking stories to other books and to real-world experiences. And some, of course, will spark conversations about upsetting or recurring issues.

TAMING THE TERRIBLE TWOS

"A language-focused home visiting program primes children for success in preschool and beyond," the program representative explained, as she tried to convince the governor's aide to increase the line item in the state budget. "It's not just language and literacy that are affected, but also social-emotional development. A child who can use her words is less likely to act out or be aggressive."

"I know," the young staffer replied. "I have a 2-year-old. She was always hitting her 8-year-old sister—I think just out of frustration. Like a lot of second-born children, I guess, she didn't talk as early as her big sister did. Just last month, she finally started to put words together and now—all of a sudden—we have a peaceful house again! I'm sure it's not anything we did. It's just, like you said, that now she can use her words."

Both tantrums and aggression peak around age 2. These are important developmental steps, not signs of ongoing trouble. For a child who is developing a sense of self, having a tantrum and hitting are effective ways to communicate: "Pay attention to ME! What I want matters, even if I'm not sure what it is or change my mind." In all cultures, however, 2-year-olds need to learn to express their autonomy in socially acceptable ways and to consider others as well as themselves. When parents and teachers respond to toddlers' outbursts with understanding, firmness, and positive discipline techniques, they help toddlers learn self-control.

The toddler's mastery of language also helps. Once toddlers can use their words to express their wishes and emotions, to reassure themselves when they are worried or scared, or to remind themselves of the proper ways to behave, they often become happier and easier to live with—at least most of the time. A gentle and

well-timed reminder from an adult or older sibling can often help a frustrated, angry, or insistent toddler to use his words rather than hitting, screaming, or dissolving into tears.

Toddlers who become adept at communicating with words are likely to become calmer 3-year-olds who can talk themselves through difficulties or ask for help. By 4, they are likely to be better at the self-regulation skills that research has found to be associated with long-term success (Galinsky, 2012). In experiments that call for waiting to attain a goal, they express less frustration and anger and are more able to use a variety of strategies to seek help, distract themselves, or remind themselves of the goal (Roben et al., 2013).

No matter how good toddlers are at using their words, though, it isn't easy to be 2. You want so badly to do the things you see big people do, but you just aren't tall enough or strong enough or fast enough or good enough at remembering what to do first. People are always making you wait, or sit still, or share, or take "just a little"—and you aren't good at any of these things. Your puzzle pieces are supposed to go together, but sometimes they just won't. Your clothes are too tight or too scratchy or your favorite ones are in the wash. You try hard to be helpful and make people happy, but your "help" isn't always appreciated.

Mercer Mayer captured this perfectly in his book *Just for You* (1998), a favorite with toddlers and parents alike. Little Critter, the hero of that story, keeps trying to be helpful. He tries to carry the groceries, but the bag breaks. He tries repeatedly to clean up the messes he makes, but each attempt somehow leads to a bigger mess. He tries his best not to splash in the bathtub and soak the whole room, but his imagination and activity level just will not be contained. "There was a storm," he explains. Of course, Little Critter's efforts are both exasperating and endearing, and eventually he does find a way to do something "just for you" that every parent can truly appreciate.

Toddlers are beginning to understand the consequences of their actions, even if they can't always anticipate or control them. Many parents find that when their children are just beginning to put words together, it's best to keep explanations simple and to quickly redirect a toddler from a dangerous, annoying, or inappropriate activity to something more acceptable. "Sand is not for throwing. Say, 'Bye-bye, sand.' Time to play on the grass. You can throw your ball."

As children demonstrate the ability to link actions and consequences in their play and to use language to organize their behavior, parents can shift to more complex explanations and enlist their children's reasoning. "Sand is not for throwing. The wind can blow it into people's eyes. That hurts. What can we do with the sand that is safe and fun?" Although it won't avert every power struggle, this kind of guidance and discipline builds the child's competence—in acceptable behavior, self-regulation, and language.

Caleb hated transitions. He didn't want to stop playing with his puzzles to eat lunch, leave the table when lunch was finished, put down his books or blocks to put on his jacket and go outside, or come in when outside play time ended. A 2-minute warning was helpful but not always enough. When she could, Caleb's caregiver offered him simple choices: "Should we wash your hands at the table or at the sink?" "Do you want to get your jacket or do you want me to get it?" She knew that Caleb would be more likely to comply if the choice was his—and also that he would be using his words to express his choice or, on occasion, to propose a third alternative. But sometimes Caleb simply refused to choose.

Fortunately, Caleb and his caregiver shared an off-beat sense of humor. One day, when Caleb was being particularly recalcitrant about getting ready to go home, she wrapped his jacket around him. "Okay, Caleb. I'm turning you into a rolling pin. Roll, roll, roll the dough." As she rolled a now giggling Caleb back and forth, she gently tucked his arms into his sleeves.

Caleb's parents used a different but equally effective technique. When Caleb resisted their efforts to prepare him for a change or kept asking for more time long after the 2 minutes had elapsed, they knew there was no point in reasoning with him. However, they could reason with Garfield, the stuffed cat who accompanied Caleb everywhere.

"Garfield," Caleb's mother would say, "It's time for you to go to child care. I know you don't want to be left behind today. Your friend Sunshine will be there, and you can play with the dinosaurs together. Do you want me to carry you or do you want Caleb to?"

Most of the time, Caleb would quickly get into the act and help get Garfield to child care.

Intent on their own agendas and determined to assert their identities, toddlers often resist changes that they do not initiate. But most are easily intrigued by humor or fantasy. With the tension diffused, it is easier to find a compromise that both they and their parents or teachers can accept.

Dr. Marilyn Segal, a pioneering infant psychologist and parent educator, developed a sure-fire cure for her grandchildren's temper tantrums. As soon as the children were old enough to imitate her words and actions and appreciate her silliness, she taught them the "right" way to have a tantrum. Making it clear that this was a game, she led them step-by-step through the process, exaggerating the motions and sound effects until the children could no longer contain their giggles. The children loved the game. When a tantrum loomed over a minor issue, their Nana would help the child put her complaint into words. "Grump," she might say. "I hate having carrots on my pasta plate. I think I'll have a temper tantrum. First the arms...." As long as the child was not in acute distress, the threatened tantrum would dissolve into shared laughter. The following poem, which is fun to act out together with a loud "whooop!" for the scream, was written by Dr. Segal, with some help from her grandchildren and their parents.

How to Have a Temper Tantrum

How to have a tantrum

Is something every child should know.

If you don't know, I can teach you.

I'm a temper tantrum pro.

With my kind of tantrum, there's nothing to fear.

I can do it without even shedding a tear.

Are you ready to try a tantrum now?

Then listen up! I will tell you how.

First wave your arms up in the air

With all the power you can spare.

The next thing to do is to stamp your feet.

Stamp so hard you break up the street.

Then after that you can gurgle and rumble

Shout "grump, grr-rump," and then start to grumble.

When you can't grumble for one minute more

Give one last grr-rump and fall on the floor.

Now let out a really ear-splitting scream

whooop!

Just as loud as a whole football team.
Scream so loud that you're certain to scare
All of the people everywhere.

Then be real quiet for a second or two
To make sure that somebody's watching you.
You'll know that your tantrum was perfectly done
When you get the attention of everyone. (Bardige & Segal, 2005, p. 27)

For real tantrums, the ones that reflect intense frustration or distress and that a child cannot control, Dr. Brazelton's advice has stood the test of time:

It's often wisest to simply make sure he can't hurt himself, then walk out of the room. Soon after you leave, the tantrum or violent behavior is likely to subside. In a while, go back to him, pick him up to contain and love him, and sit down in a rocking chair to soothe him. You want him to know that you care, that you understand, and that tantrums are not something to be ashamed of or punished for. When he's able to listen, try to let him know that you can see how hard it is to be two or three and to be unable to make up one's own mind. But let him know that he will learn how and that meanwhile, it's okay. (Brazelton & Sparrow, 2006, p. 278)

USING LANGUAGE TO LEARN

- "What's that man's name? Where is he going? Why don't you know?"
- "Can I drive the bus?"
- "Does Corduroy miss his Mommy?"

-
- “Where’s Little Sal’s Daddy?”
 - “Why is that boy crying?”
 - “Why are you washing the pot?”
 - “What’s gonna happen?”

Children’s questions are gifts. They let us know how children see the world and how we can enhance their understanding. They give us opportunities to respond to a child’s interest and also introduce new words and concepts. Probably the best way to encourage them is to show interest, and to respond with straightforward answers that encourage further discussion.

Remember—with young children, especially—questions don’t always start with *who*, *what*, *where*, *when*, *why*, or *how*. Children may ask their questions with a gesture, such as pointing accompanied by a quizzical look, a statement that ends with rising intonation (e.g., “Mama mad?”), or a request for confirmation (e.g., “The moon comes out at night, right?”). Often, questions are asked through actions—such as holding up a broken toy or mixing different color paints to see what will happen.

Two-year-olds’ questions are likely to be related to an immediate situation. They want to know the names of the people and objects they see around them or in their storybooks, as well as where they are going, what they are doing, and why. They want help in understanding how things work, how they can do the exciting things that they see big people doing, and how one event is related to another. They want to know whether the people, animals, and imaginary friends they encounter in the real world and in storybooks and videos have families and feelings and experiences like theirs and, if not, why not. As adults answer toddlers’ explicit and implicit questions, they help them to “read the world” (Rosenkoetter & Knapp-Philo, 2006).

Adults can also ask children questions in many ways: by asking directly, by pointing out something interesting, or by sharing our own curiosity and wonder. The most interesting questions—and those that build language—are the ones whose answers the questioner doesn’t know in advance and really wants to learn. They are the questions that go beyond quizzing (e.g., “What color is that?”) or issues of compliance (e.g., “Did you put your toys away?”) to really engage thinking and curiosity.

-
- “What would you like to play today?”
 - “Why do you think your friend is crying? How can we help him feel better?”
 - “Why do you think it gets dark at night?”
 - “What do we need for our tea party?”
 - “Where do you think Spot will hide next?”
 - “Who did you play with at child care today? What did you do together?”
 - “How do you think we can make this toy go?”
 - “That looks like some sort of seed pod. Where did you find it? Do you think it came from a tree?”
 - “If you were a very hungry caterpillar, what would you want to eat?”
 - I wonder how I could make this toy car go faster...

LANGUAGE-RICH CHILD CARE PROGRAMS

The 2-year-olds in Miss Rachel’s classroom have been reading the classics. *Goldilocks and the Three Bears* gave them a chance to work with mathematical concepts. As they played out the story with stuffed animals—giving the biggest bear the biggest bowl, the biggest chair, and the loudest voice—they arranged objects by size, worked with sets of three, recognized and created patterns, and practiced counting one object at a time. They read several different versions of the story but in the end preferred their own—with Goldilocks becoming friends with the bears but learning some manners and knocking before entering.

They’ve moved on now—to *The Three Little Pigs*. Again, they’ve read several versions of the story (with some editing by their teacher so that none of the pigs get eaten and the wolf escapes unscathed) and talked about the similarities and differences among the versions. They have made their own books, using stickers of pigs and wolves and pasting real straw and twigs onto their drawings of the houses. Of course, some children decided that

there should be more than three pigs and that they should build a house or a village together. Some put walls around the village to keep the wolf away; others had the pigs make the wolf a birthday cake that they could all share.

Miss Rachel encouraged the children to explore the materials as they worked on their books. Was straw soft or scratchy? Strong or brittle? Could they blow away a piece of straw or hay? Could they make a twig move if they blew really hard? Or if two children blew together? What about a brick? But the children didn't stop there. They tried to make model houses from the straw and twigs, but didn't get very far. They took turns showing off their strength as they hefted the heavy brick, then decided to build a house with the cardboard bricks in their block area. Their teacher helped them to lay out the foundation for the house. When they ran out of cardboard bricks, she helped them figure out how many they would need to borrow from another classroom to make it tall enough to stand up in.

Miss Rachel then brought in a large carton so that the children could design and build a more permanent house. They decided to make it a rainbow house and worked together to paint it in many colors. When the house was finished, the children used it to reenact their own version of the story.

"Little pigs, little pigs, let me come in," said the wolf as she knocked gently.

"Not by the hair of my chinny chin chin," one little pig responded.

"Please?" asked the wolf sweetly.

"Okay. You can come in. Want some birthday cake?"

"I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll blow out the candles."

Two-year-olds thrive in language-rich environments. No matter the setting—whether at home or at child care in a center, family child care home, Early Head Start program, or community play space—a language-rich environment includes people who are fun to play with. The group is small enough for the children to get to know their child and adult playmates well. Children's questions and discoveries are encouraged, taken seriously, and greeted with delight. Adults expand on children's ideas and seek ways to further challenge their thinking.

In settings such as these, adults and children do a lot of talking. Books; planned activities; and the objects, stories, and questions that children bring from home spark investigation, pretend play, and extended projects—all of which fuel information-rich, back-and-forth conversations among children and adults that build children’s language and communicative competence.

Conversations occur in small groups or one to one, with a lot of time for toddlers to formulate their ideas and put them into words. Intimate spaces foster quiet exchanges, and more open places support active play and larger group activities. Continuity and predictability are balanced with challenge and surprise. Familiar objects, arrangements, routines, and activities invite children to play out favorite themes, deepen their knowledge, and practice using words they know. Unusual objects and arrangements, new books, outings, and visitors prompt the children to investigate and to ask new questions and also introduce words and ideas that stretch children’s vocabularies. Songs, stories, objects, and caregiving routines that are culturally familiar support children’s emerging identities and help them feel at home in the group. New foods, art materials, musical forms, and other unfamiliar experiences pique their curiosity and extend both language and coping skills.

There are “many right ways” (Modigliani & Moore, 2005) to create a language-rich child care environment. Some things are constant: warm relationships; interesting things to talk about; interested people to talk with—and a group that is small enough so that every child can explore at her own pace, develop enduring friendships, and have relaxed conversations with adults many times throughout each day. Other things vary: whether the children are all about the same age or range across several years; whether the setting looks like a classroom, a playground, a home, or some combination of these; whether the things the children are playing with are natural objects, homemade creations, household materials, or store-bought toys; and whether only one language is spoken, read, and sung or whether language-building activities take place in more than one language.

Some things that are becoming increasingly common in young children’s worlds would be kept to a minimum or absent altogether from language-rich child care environments. Idle waiting, aimless wandering, and standing in line quietly would be rare. The television, if one is present, would be off most of the time. If providers

showed brief videos or children’s television shows, they would be used like storybooks—to spark conversations and follow-up activities. There would not be a lot of recorded music, either, unless it was played at a child’s request, as part of a planned group activity, or to signal a change of pace. Instead, children and adults would be singing, dancing, and playing instruments, putting their own motions and words to familiar rhymes and tunes, and enjoying inventive wordplay.

Computers, tablets, and smartphones (whether set up primarily for child or adult use) would be offered with deliberate intent. After reading about a caterpillar, for example, a toddler group might watch a video online of caterpillars hatching from eggs, eating and growing, spinning cocoons or chrysalises, and emerging as moths or butterflies. Their teacher would encourage them to describe what they see, ask more questions, and tell their own stories.

Language-rich environments do not have a lot of worksheets, flashcards, or “educational” toys that can only be played with one way to produce a correct response. Adults ask some of the questions, but the children themselves ask many of them, either with words or through gestures and play. Curious, receptive, observant teachers build on those questions to expand children’s language and prompt further exploration.

Two-year-olds like to imitate each other, so several children may be playing with similar toys or making the same art projects. Still, the teachers will not be marching children through a set curriculum, so focused on completing one activity and setting up the next that they miss the opportunities for real conversation.

READING, WRITING, COUNTING, AND PROBLEM SOLVING

As a family child care provider with a degree in child development, Laurie was determined not to teach her 2-year-old daughter the alphabet. “There’s too much emphasis today on pushing,” she explained to the other parents. “Two-year-olds are interested in things they can touch, see, and do. We do lots of talking and reading and scribbling and hands-on investigation. Letters don’t mean a lot at this point.” One day, however, Laurie’s daughter returned from a weekend visit with her grandparents singing the ABC song.

Soon Laurie discovered that some of the other 2-year-olds were singing it as well. Laurie realized that the alphabet was an important part of these children's culture—especially for those who had older siblings in kindergarten or first grade. She was surprised, though, when on one of their walks around the block, one of the children stopped and pointed to the letters on a manhole cover. "Look," the child said with excitement, "it's the alphabet." The other children repeated reverently, "The alphabet." Then, quite spontaneously, they all joined hands and sang the alphabet song.

Teachers like Laurie understand that instruction in ABCs and phonics is premature for most 2-year-olds. Just as it makes little sense to teach esoteric words and factoids to young children outside of the meaningful contexts of direct experience, stories, and picture books, it seems reasonable to hold off on teaching the components of written language until children have learned that print represents spoken words and words are made up of identifiable parts. But that doesn't mean that 2 is too early to introduce children to many forms of print—books, lists, messages, labels, captions, and even individual letters and alphabet displays.

Two-year-olds who see the important adults in their lives reading and discussing books, letters, magazines, labels, and advertisements and writing checks, notes, to-do lists, appointment schedules, texts, and e-mails want to imitate these activities. Computers, remote controllers, and phones—which combine letters and numbers with buttons that can be pushed—are likely to be irresistible. And, if reading is defined to include identifying books by their covers, finding favorite cereals on grocery store shelves, recognizing other environmental print such as store logos and stop signs, and reciting memorized lines or even whole books while turning the pages appropriately, then many 2-year-olds are adept and eager readers. Likewise, if random keyboarding and the little squiggles and chicken scratches that many 2-year-olds append as a signature to their scribbled artworks or proudly identify as "letters" count as "writing," then many children are writing by their third birthdays.

Two-year-olds who play with alphabet blocks or ABC books may learn letter names, just as they learn the names of other objects and pictures, but it will likely be several years before this knowledge is of much use to them. What they are learning about speaking, listening, reading, and writing as they share books and conversations

with responsive adults and imitate valued adult activities is of far greater importance.

Amina had only a few years of schooling as a child. Although she had learned to speak English in her adopted country, her reading of even the simplest texts was halting at best. When a home visitor arrived with a book for Amina's 2-year-old daughter, Ayana, Amina's first reaction was panic. Would she be expected to read to her daughter already? Couldn't she just wait for her daughter to be old enough to learn to read in school? Amina listened closely as the home visitor explained that reading aloud on a daily basis was one of the most important things parents could do to help their children learn to read. Holding Ayana on her lap, Amina listened intently as the home visitor read the simple, repetitive text and encouraged Ayana to repeat some of the words. Both Ayana and Amina urged the home visitor to read the book several times.

On the next home visit, Amina showed the visitor how she and Ayana read the book together, exactly as they had been shown. But she declined to read the new book, insisting that the home visitor do it. It took several months for Amina to feel comfortable enough with the home visitor to admit that she had been memorizing the books. Surprised and deeply moved, the home visitor assured Amina that her enthusiastic "reading" and her commitment to helping her 2-year-old develop a love of books and stories were exactly what Ayana needed.

What is true of literacy is also true of math. Numbers, like letters, are the tip of an iceberg whose subsurface mass is far greater than its more obvious protuberance. Toddlers who hear number names in counting songs and ordinary conversations and see numerals on elevators, phones, door frames, and picture book pages may learn to recognize number words as such, to recognize some numerals, and to count forward or even backward by rote. They learn concepts of size, sequence, quantity, one-to-one correspondence, and measurement over time through direct play, active problem solving, and related conversation.

Infants have a basic idea of more or less. They can distinguish between a few and a lot and between quantities of one, two, and three. These capacities seem to be inborn. What really matters for later mathematical learning, though, is *number sense*, something

toddlers build through hands-on play and accompanying conversation. The more “number talk” they do, the more they learn (Levine et al., 2010)!

Counting sets of between 4 and 10 objects seems to be particularly helpful (Gunderson & Levine, 2011). Children practice saying the numbers in order, practice touching objects and saying numbers, and eventually learn to put one number with one object and stop when all have been counted. Children can also build number sense by counting actions, such as steps, jumps, claps, and drumbeats. (See <http://www.lesley.edu/sidewalk-math/> for patterns you can paint or chalk on floors or sidewalks to encourage math talk with toddlers and help toddlers and older children to build number sense.)

Miss Rachel’s students were developing number sense when they matched the biggest bed with the biggest bear, gave each bear a chair and a bowl of porridge, noticed that *The Three Bears* and *The Three Little Pigs* were stories about three animals, and figured out how many blocks they needed to borrow to complete their house. Toddlers develop concepts of size, weight, direction, sequence, pattern, experimentation, and problem solving that are at the core of mathematics and science when they figure out how to make block towers and bridges that don’t fall down, traverse interesting obstacle courses, find the right-sized wrench to tighten a bolt or a stepping stool that will enable them to reach a high shelf, put together a simple puzzle or sort the family socks, ride a tricycle or scooter, or use sand molds to make a castle.

Adults can help children practice counting during daily activities, such as setting the table or setting up a play activity. They can also use mathematical vocabulary, such as the following, in their ordinary conversations with children.

- Number and quantity words such as *two*, *six*, *half*, *few*, *several*, and *hundred*
- Size words such as *tall*, *fat*, *tiny*, *huge*, *long*, *wide*, *heavy*, *skinny*, and *gigantic*
- Space and direction words such as *near*, *above*, *left*, *straight*, *middle*, and *where*
- Comparative words such as *more*, *very*, *worse*, *bigger*, and *fastest*

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- Shape words such as *square, circle, round, oval, zigzag, squiggly,* and *triangle*
 - Measurement words such as *inches, quart, pound, temperature,* and *liter*
 - Time words such as *when, now, soon, yesterday, after, then, year,* and *minute*
 - Problem-solving words such as *match, fit, figure out, count, add, take away, how much, why, even,* and *enough*

Adults can also help by being alert to what children are trying to figure out or accomplish and available to help when the problems children encounter or create become overly challenging or frustrating. Telling a child what to do is usually less helpful than coaching him by helping him describe the problem, asking leading questions, noting partial successes, suggesting next steps or a new way to frame the problem, or demonstrating a key step without solving the problem for the child. Often an older sibling or friend will be able to show the toddler a trick or make the problem easier.

Can You Help Me Fix My Wagon?

My wagon's wheel is wobbly
It's not exactly tight.
Will you help me fix it?
Can you help me make it right?

I wonder why it wobbles
And what we need to do.
Can we fix it with a hammer?
Does it need an extra screw?

When we have fixed my wagon
We both can sit inside.
It will be so exciting
To take a wagon ride. (Bardige & Segal, 2005, p. 168)

Of course, one of the best ways to support budding scientists and mathematicians is to set the stage for exploration, encourage them to talk about their approaches and discoveries, and share their delight when they achieve their goals or produce unexpected outcomes.

TWENTY FUN THINGS TO DO WITH OLDER TODDLERS AND TWOS

1. *Play a memory game:* Place a few small items on a table. Then, ask the child to close her eyes while you hide one or two in your hand. See if she can guess what you are holding. Now let her take a turn. At first, she may think your ability to figure out what she is holding is magic, but after a while she will realize that you can tell what is missing by looking at what is left. Try using items that are all the same and asking the child to tell you how many you are holding.
2. *Play a guessing game:* Put a small item in a bag. Ask the toddler to reach in and try to guess what the item is without looking at it. Ask leading questions to support his thinking: “What does it feel like?” “Is it hard or soft?” “Does it have wheels?” “What do you think it’s made of?” “What else do you notice?”
3. *Make Jell-O together:* Read the directions one step at a time and talk about each step. Talk about what happens as the powder dissolves and as the Jell-O cools and begins to set. Try making different colors and using cookie cutters to cut out different shapes. Make up fun names for your creations: “jiggle wiggle worms,” “twinkly winkly stars,” “cherry-berry yum drops,” “green goop.”
4. *Experiment with sounds:* Use your voices to make loud sounds and soft sounds, high sounds and low sounds, long sounds and short sounds, fast sounds and slow sounds. Make rain sounds by squeezing water from a sponge onto different surfaces. Imitate other sounds such as popcorn popping, dogs barking, buses going by, and footsteps approaching. Make simple instruments by using wooden or metal spoons to hit pot lids, aluminum pie plates, oatmeal boxes, or empty and water-filled plastic bottles. Fill different containers with rice or beans to make shakers. Talk about all of the different sounds you can make.
5. *Experiment with different consistencies:* Try making different consistencies of sand or mud in a sandbox, water table, kiddie pool, or large bin or at a beach. Introduce different tools for sifting, molding, digging, stirring, building, carrying, shaping, sprinkling, soaking, splattering, and poking. Use sticks or small objects to write or draw or to adorn your creations. Use words such as *sticky, gooey, damp, powdery, thick, runny, slippery, lumpy, fill, shape, pat, decorate, bury, and tunnel* as you plan and play together.

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6. *Wash things:* Give a toddler bins or pails of soapy and clean water and let her wash toys or doll clothes, or engage her in washing large items such as riding toys with soapy water, rags, and a hose. Add tools such as spray or squirt bottles, sponges, washcloths, scrub brushes, towels, and a clothes line. On a sunny day, make rainbows in the hose spray or watch drops and puddles evaporate. Use words such as *scrub*, *rinse*, *drip*, *drop*, *splash*, *squeeze*, *wring*, *wipe*, *dirty*, and *shiny* as you talk with the toddler about what she is doing.
 7. *Create a “gas station” for tricycles and other riding toys:* Most 2-year-olds aren’t fussy about realism. You can use a hose, jump rope, or empty watering can to fill the “gas tanks,” a turkey baster or cardboard tube to put “air” into the tires, and plastic tools or even unsharpened pencils to “check the oil,” “tune up the engine,” or “repair” anything that is broken. When favored riding toys are in short supply, many children are happy to take a turn as the “gas station attendant,” with a little adult support.
 8. *Fingerpaint with shaving cream or whipped cream:* With these materials, children can safely fingerpaint on a table or tray—or even on their faces and bodies—without making too much of a mess. A small amount of food coloring can add to the fun as a toddler works individually or with others to mix different colors. As you observe a child or fingerpaint with her, describe the shifting patterns you see and encourage her to do the same: “Here comes a long, wiggly snake.” “Here comes a bunny—hop, hop, hop.” Remember that for 2-year-olds, the fun is in the process, not the final result.
 9. *Make playdough:* Let the toddler help with the process by pouring in the flour, salt, and water; deciding what food coloring to add; stirring the batter; and kneading the dough. Give the toddler balls of soft dough, and encourage him to roll them flat, using a cylindrical block or a small rolling pin. Give him some small (but big enough not to be swallowed) objects such as old keys, jar tops, plastic letters, toy trucks and animals, cookie cutters, craft sticks, shells, pebbles, and large beads. Show him how to use these objects to make impressions and designs in the play dough, to cut out different shapes, or to decorate playdough cakes. Help the toddler use his words to ask for objects he wants, talk about what he is doing, and tell others about his creations.

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10. *Make books, collages, and mobiles:* Help the toddler with these projects by cutting pictures from magazines, catalogs, calendars, greeting cards, product labels, and advertising circulars; pasting them onto construction paper or index cards; and then stapling or tying the pages together or hanging cards from a coat hanger. Encourage her to choose pictures related to a theme, such as “my favorite things,” “things to eat for breakfast,” “farm animals,” or “my favorite color.” Talk with the toddler about the pictures she selected, and help her find others that she would like to add. Be sure to encourage the toddler to share her books or artistic creations with family and friends.
 11. *Make doll furniture:* Use diaper boxes, tissue boxes, or other cartons to build beds, chairs, cradles, boats, kitchen appliances, or carriages for dolls and stuffed animals. Join the toddler in pretend play and conversation as he takes care of his babies.
 12. *Go on a hike:* Pack up a wagon or backpack with snacks and with plastic bags, pails, or other containers for collecting interesting objects and a journal or camera (real or pretend) for recording interesting sights and experiences. Sing traveling songs. Hunt for rocks, seeds, shells, bugs, different-colored houses or flowers, or shapes such as triangles, squares, circles, and octagons. Stop to watch people at work. Make up stories about the real or magical creatures that live in rocks, trees, or sidewalk cracks; on rooftops; or under the ground. When you return, help the toddler make a collage or scrapbook so that she can tell others what she discovered on her hike.
 13. *Meet the people in your neighborhood:* Introduce the toddler to the shopkeepers, neighbors, crossing guards, and pets you know, and encourage familiar people you meet to talk with him. You may need to translate for children whose pronunciation is still idiosyncratic, but try to let them speak for themselves.
 14. *Make a playhouse or fort:* Help the child make a playhouse or fort out of a large box, by blocking a corner with a chair, or by draping a blanket over a table. Encourage her to stock her special place with pillows and with favorite books and toys. When you pay a visit, be sure to knock or ring the doorbell and to bring a “special delivery.”

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15. *Read an animal book together and act out the animal motions and sounds it describes:* Good books to act out include *From Head to Toe* (Carle, 1999) and *Mr. Brown Can Moo, Can You?* (Dr. Seuss, 1996). Practice making the animals' noises. Give the toddler a chance to act out motions on cue, and also to say some of the words while you take a turn acting out the motions. Have your own animal parade with others, with each person being a different animal. You can enhance the parade with animal hats (a headband with ears works fine, and is easy to make). Talk to each animal in ways that encourage further pretending. "Hi, Cat. Yes, I heard you meow. Does that mean you want some milk? Here. Lap it all up! You were very thirsty! Do you want some more?"
 16. *Make a stage for performances:* It can be as simple as a low platform, mat, or throw rug. Supply some simple clothing that children can use for dance or circus costumes. Place a mirror nearby so that they can check out their regalia. Sing a song, turn on a recording, or encourage the children to make their own music with voices and/or instruments. Be sure to clap when the performance is done and then ask for an encore.
 17. *Help children act out a simple, familiar story:* Often this is easiest when an adult takes the narrator's role, cuing children when to play their parts. "The three bears go into the kitchen. Father bear looks in his bowl and says..."
 18. *Explore shadows:* Encourage a toddler to watch his own and others' shadows as you take a walk on a sunny day. Can he step on your shadow? On his own? What does the toddler's shadow do when he walks forward or backward or turns around? Do other things, such as trees and cars, have shadows? What happens to his shadow when he stands in a tree's shadow? Use a flashlight to explore shadows indoors.
 19. *Plant a garden:* Radishes, marigolds, and beans germinate fairly rapidly, and children can start them in paper cups or directly in the garden. Children can plant fast-growing herbs such as mint, parsley, basil, and chives in a window box or container or along a path and pick them to flavor their mud pies and tea party drinks. As you involve children in digging, planting, watering, checking on growth, and harvesting, you can

talk about what the plants need to grow and all of the ways that people help them. Encourage the children to look for changes in their plants and talk with you about what they see.

20. *Talk about when the toddler was a baby:* Just out of babyhood themselves, most 2-year-olds are fascinated with infants. Capitalize on this interest by reading books about human and animal babies; telling stories about when the toddler was little; talking about all the things that she can do that babies can't; playing with baby dolls or baby stuffed animals together; and, if possible, giving her carefully supervised opportunities to interact with real babies. When a baby is around, enlist the older child's help in figuring out what the baby wants, getting things for the baby to play with, engaging the baby in simple back-and-forth routines that are fun for them both, and recognizing when it is time for the baby to take a rest.

A WEALTH OF WORDS

"Travis, why are you making me do all the work?" his caregiver asked one day when Travis was being particularly demanding. Travis responded without missing a beat, proudly (mis)using his newest word: "Cause Travis is being generous."

Words are brain food for 2-year-olds. Having rich, engaging conversations with all of the important people in their lives helps 2-year-olds to build the vocabularies, information stores, and neurological connections that they will draw on as they face more complicated problems; weave more elaborate stories and imaginative play scenarios; and, over the next 3 or 4 years, learn to read.

In the period between 18 months and 3½ years, children rapidly acquire words, concepts, language patterns, and the ability to use language in a variety of ways for a variety of purposes. Home visiting, child care, and parent-child programs that target language during this time have had remarkable, long-term results. Comprehensive programs that combine approaches can add still more value.

Programs such as the Parent-Child Home Program, Parents as Teachers, AVANCE, Even Start, the Abecedarian Project, the

Infant Health and Development Program, and Early Head Start have reduced or erased early disadvantages for children in low-income families, children whose parents have had little education, and children with moderate developmental challenges associated with difficulties at birth. In a host of longitudinal studies, graduates of these programs have achieved average or above average test scores at school entry and in the elementary grades. Those who have been followed into adulthood have graduated high school at similar rates as more privileged peers and often have gone on to succeed in higher education (Bardige, 2005). For middle-income children who are typically developing, a small but intensive study (Vernon-Feagans et al., 2007) showed that child care quality had a notable effect on language development. Language developed faster—both in terms of vocabulary and in terms of grammatical complexity and functional usage—for children in higher quality child care programs with fewer children per teacher, better trained teachers, and more one-to-one conversation than for children of similar background whose child care was of lower quality. For toddlers of all backgrounds, higher quality child care that is richer in language supports is associated with higher achievement in the early elementary school years.

At home, in child care, and in the community, language-building experiences tap into older toddlers' growing communication abilities. Their power is enhanced when communication partners optimize the 5 *Rs* of *Responsive* conversation; contextual and conceptual cues to the *Referents* of new words; *Rich* language that grows in complexity at a comfortably challenging *Rate*; and *Repetition* of new words and phrases in routines, rhymes, conversation, and play across varied contexts that deepen understanding (see Figure 4.2).

Sensitive, enriching, optimally challenging one-to-one conversation can make an important difference for children whose language lags (Moore, Barton, & Chironis, 2014). For children with or at risk for autism spectrum disorder, such language-building conversations may be especially important in the toddler years, a time when the brain's language circuitry remains open to rapid development (Baker et al., 2010).

Toddlerhood is a time when many children fall in love with words. They learn that some words can impress, others can shock, and still others can provoke laughter or defuse a conflict. "Magic



Responsiveness (Serve and Return)

—Face to face—Contingent (responding to what your partner just said or did)—More “turns”—Engaging, child-directed speech—Follow the child’s lead

Richness (Play Talk)

—More words—Description and details—Specific words—Beyond the here and now—Interesting and fun-to-say words

Referent Clarity (What Are You Talking About?)

—Nonverbal clues—Joint attention—Connection to experience—Baby sign—Context

Rate (Time to Process)

—Just enough—Expand and elaborate—Contextual priming (e.g., This word is likely a color)—WAIT for a reply—Wait longer for a child to shift from one language to another

Repetition

—Elaborated reminiscing—Pattern—Favorite stories and books—Songs and games—Same words in multiple contexts (and languages)—Practice!

Figure 4.2. Building 2-year-old language: Optimizing the 5 Rs.

words” such as *please* and *scooz me* make it easier for them to get what they want, whereas words and phrases such as *mine*, *my turn*, and *go away* protect them from losing what they have or getting what they don’t want. They learn that some words have special functions, such as counting or naming colors, and they often recognize a word as a color or number word before learning its precise meaning. Their favorite books, songs, and family stories are filled with words that sound pretty and are fun to repeat.

“A Ram Sam Sam” is a nonsense song from Morocco, enjoyed by children throughout the world. The words are often accompanied by simple gestures—clapping on “ram sam sam,” rolling hands on “guli guli,” and putting hands up beside the face on “rafi.” Children love to repeat them, even though they don’t mean anything in any language.

A Ram Sam Sam

A ram sam sam, a ram sam sam
 Guli guli guli guli guli ram sam sam
 A ram sam sam, a ram sam sam
 Guli guli guli guli guli ram sam sam

A rafi, a rafi,
Guli guli guli guli guli ram sam sam
A rafi, a rafi,
Guli guli guli guli guli ram sam sam

“Down by the Station,” written by Lee Ricks and Slim Gailand in 1948 and widely adapted, is fun for toddlers who are enamored by trains and like to shout out sound effects. Many toddlers enjoy the challenge of getting their tongues around the interesting word *puffer-bellies*. As they learn to say this word, they can also practice puffing like little round-bellied steam engines.

Down by the Station

Down by the station
Early in the morning,
See the little puffer-bellies
All in a row.

Hear the station master
Sounding out his warning
Chug chug. Toot toot.
Off they go!

The following song was created by a 2-year-old word lover—with some help from his mother—as they raked leaves and played together in the piles. It’s easy to add to or to adapt for puddles, mud, or snow.

Playing in the Leaves

I’m raking all the leaves.
I’m shaking all the leaves.
I’m taking all the leaves.

I’m jumping in the leaves.
I’m thumping in the leaves.
We’re bumping in the leaves.

I’m blowing lots of leaves.
I’m throwing lots of leaves.
It’s snowing lots of leaves.

I’m singing in the leaves.
I’m swinging in the leaves.
I’m flinging all the leaves.

We’re playing in the leaves.
We’re swaying in the leaves.
I’m staying in the leaves.

Songs like “If You’re Happy and You Know It” and “Shake My Sillies Out” (Raffi, 1988) are easy to extend and adapt with words that capture a toddler’s strong emotions: excited, worried, curious, playful, angry, tired, proud, grumpy, fidgety, sorry, sad, hurting, fearful, confident, calm. A song like “Shake My Sillies Out” also prompts word-play. As children use made-up words such as *sillies* and *waggles* and invent similar ones such as *saddies*, *twitchies*, and *grumpies* to add to the song, they are also learning about how words are put together and practicing both sound and grammatical patterns.

If You’re Happy and You Know It (variation)

If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands.

If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands.

If you’re happy and you know it,

Then your face will surely show it.

If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands!

If you’re angry and you know it, stomp your feet.

If you’re angry and you know it, stomp your feet.

If you’re angry and you know it,

Then your face will surely show it.

If you’re angry and you know it, stomp your feet!

If you’re excited and you know it, jump for joy.

If you’re excited and you know it, jump for joy.

If you’re excited and you know it,

Then your face will surely show it.

If you’re excited and you know it, jump for joy!

It’s fun and often easy for children to learn new words that are inserted into the well-rehearsed patterns of their favorite songs and nursery rhymes. Toddlers also enjoy learning lots of words within a category, such as vegetables, earth-moving machines, sharks, or crayon colors. It is not unusual for a 2-year-old with a special interest to be able to identify exotic animals or many kinds of sports cars and to know some words that will be foreign to most adults.

The more children learn about the sounds, meanings, and uses of the words they know, the easier it will be for them to learn similar words when they encounter them in speech and, later on, in writing. The more words they know, the more likely they will be to notice and learn from such similarities and the easier it will be for them to learn new words. Engaging eager toddlers in conversation, storytelling, and word play builds learning patterns that accelerate

language development and prime children to be successful readers. Equally important, it enables parents and teachers to appreciate and support toddlers' unfolding minds and wonderfully individual personalities.

"What color are my eyes?" Dr. Sherry asked his 2-year-old patient. Knowing that this child was verbally precocious and enjoyed showing off his knowledge, the doctor was a bit surprised when Brennan didn't answer, but he was careful not to show it. He could see that Brennan was thinking, so he waited...and waited...and waited. Finally, Brennan solemnly announced his conclusion: "Turquoise."

When Professor JoAnne Knapp Philo told this story at a national infant-toddler conference, she ended with a reminder to listen closely and patiently to what 2-year-olds have to say. "If we don't give them enough of a chance to respond," she explained, "we may miss the gems."

