Language & literacy in one-year-olds

There are many remarkable changes between children’s first and second birthdays. The most obvious is that they begin talking. As exciting as those first words are, they are only a slice of the language gains that one-year-olds (ones) make. Discover the ways ones change and grow in their understanding and use of language.

Talking!

What children are doing:
Most children say their first recognizable words around their first birthday. They slowly add to their vocabulary with words that are relevant to their experiences. After 18 months, they go through a period of rapid word learning, often learning and using an average of 10-20 new words a week. Most of these new words are labels for objects.

What caregivers can provide:
• Lots of spoken language – this is the most important thing.
• Interesting things to talk about with the children.
• Sturdy board books that include familiar objects and actions.
• Photos and other child-centered displays on the walls at the children’s level.

What caregivers can say and do:
• Talk face-to-face with toddlers. This is the most effective means of supporting ones’ language learning. Be sure that ones can clearly hear and see you.
• Talk with children during play and routines. Encourage their speech efforts.
• Expose them to lots of rich language and conversation.
• Remember that children always understand far more language than they can produce. Consider teaching ones some simple sign language to use.

Learning conversation skills

What children are doing:
Ones are familiar with the back-and-forth nature of conversation: turn-taking – the adult speaks, then waits for the child to do something, and then responds as though the child answered back. Ones are keen to add their own language to the conversation. The more caregivers engage with them in conversation, the more language the ones hear, the more practice and language skills they gain.

What caregivers can provide:
• Opportunities for relaxed, one-on-one conversation throughout the day.
• Opportunities to share a book with three or fewer children. Have an interactive conversation about the story.
• Songs or movement activities that involve call-and-response or imitation.

What caregivers can say and do:
• Recognize when a toddler is initiating a conversation, even when it’s not verbal (child holds out a cup). Respond in a way that will invite more interaction.
• Pay attention to how much adult language is directive (telling a child to do or not do something). Keep directional language to a minimum.
Becoming familiar with books

What children are doing:
Ones change from interacting with books as a toy to imitating book-reading behavior. They develop a preference for certain books and for particular pages or pictures within a book. As their vocabulary and memory skills grow, they remember words of familiar books and anticipate what’s coming next.

What caregivers can provide:
- A collection of sturdy, age-appropriate books that ones can have access to throughout the day.
- Time each day for shared book reading with a caregiver or adult volunteer.

What caregivers can say and do:
- Pay attention to individual children’s preferences for specific books or pictures.
- Be flexible about where children can look at books. Ones are very likely to carry books with them to other parts of the room.
- Be spontaneous about taking an opportunity to read aloud when a child shows an interest in a particular book.
- Model how to treat books. Talk about taking good care of books and about enjoying reading.

Drawing meaning from pictures

What children are doing:
Ones are beginning to grasp that a photo or illustration represents a real object. They are trying to make sense of how the representation and the “real thing” are the same and how they are different. They are trying to understand the labels used for categories of objects when there are obvious differences among the things that go in that category (dogs can look very different from each other).

What caregivers can provide:
- Photo collections of familiar people, objects, places, and events.
- Picture labels on storage containers of toys and materials.
- Books that depict actions, events, or emotions that ones recognize and can connect to their own experiences.

What caregivers can say and do:
- Encourage ones to make the connections between picture representations and real life as books and pictures are shared (“That’s the baby’s blanket, isn’t it? Where’s your blanket?”).
- Take photos of activities and create displays or photo albums to talk about together.

Keep in mind… It’s important to remember that every child has his or her own timeline for language learning. So what’s normal? The range for language learning is wide. The appearance of first words ranges from 8 months to as late as 18 months. Early talkers don’t have any overall advantage. Most late talkers catch up to their age mates in a year or so. However, late babbling and talking isn’t something to be ignored – it can be an early sign of hearing problems or other developmental delays. If there is a concern, don’t hesitate to seek a professional opinion. The earlier problems are discovered, the earlier children can receive the support they need.