Language & literacy in two-year-olds

Two-year-olds (twos) are expressing their opinions, making choices, and practicing independence. They are only beginning to learn language to express their thoughts, feelings, and intentions. Twos need a lot of support to succeed in using their words, especially when there is a conflict of wills. They feel excited and powerful when they’ve succeeded in using words to connect with a friend or caregiver in a meaningful way.

Using their words

What children are doing:
In general twos can be heard speaking in increasingly longer and more complex sentences, using a wider variety of words. Their ability to articulate certain language sounds is still developing, so interpreting twos’ speech can be challenging. As twos become more competent and confident, they talk more to each other. They love songs, rhymes, and books with fun language.

What caregivers can provide:
• Repetitive books, rhymes, songs.
• Books, posters, and/or cards that illustrate different emotional facial expressions.
• Puppets, dolls, and toys that represent people to encourage twos to incorporate language into their solitary play.

What caregivers can say and do:
• Extend and expand what twos say to encourage more complex speech. (Child: “Juice.” Adult: “You want more juice?”)
• Give twos words to use during social situations, when they aren’t able to understand one another and frustration is building.
• Talk while playing alongside twos. Describe actions and the materials.

Learning to love books

What children are doing:
Twos are more likely to make decisions about when, where, and how book reading takes place and to comment on the pictures while reading. Twos show a preference for particular books and intentionally choose books to look at and “read” themselves.

What caregivers can provide:
• A selection of favorite books that is available and accessible to the children for a significant portion of the day.
• A few relatively quiet places where one or two children can take a book to look at without a lot of interruption.
• Books that illustrate familiar children’s songs.

What caregivers can say and do:
• Give twos choice in selecting and interacting with books.
• Notice children’s interests and add age-appropriate books on those topics to the environment.
• Invite twos to comment on books. Encourage children to fill in the blank or predict what will be on the next page.
Imitating

What children are doing:

Imitation is one of the most effective ways to learn. Twos imitate the way adults speak to them as they talk to their dolls or stuffed animals, imitate reading as they play with books or other print materials, and imitate writing as they experiment with making marks on paper. It’s an important part of practicing and learning language and literacy.

What caregivers can provide:

• A variety of writing tools and surfaces. Include portable and stationary surfaces. Let children have free access to these materials to use them in creating artwork and to pretend-write.

What caregivers can say and do:

• Allow children to take books to other parts of the room to incorporate them into their play.
• Play along. If a child is pretending to be an adult, take on the role of a child.
• Use writing tools and surfaces that children can use in their play. Be intentional about modeling and talking about reading and writing.

Understanding illustrated stories

What children are doing:

As twos understand the connection between pictures and real life, they begin to understand the concept of a sequence of events illustrated by pictures, to grasp concepts like cause and effect and events in time. Experience with simple storybooks and other depictions of a sequence of events support their learning.

What caregivers can provide:

• Children’s books that depict the sequence of familiar events or experiences.
• Display pictures that depict a sequence of relevant events in the child care environment, such as washing hands.
• Photo albums of a special event with all phases in sequence. Let the children retell the experience.

What caregivers can say and do:

• Ask twos questions during book reading that tap into their understanding of sequence (“What happens next?”) and that make the connection between the story and their own experience (“The boy is playing with the ball in his yard. What do you play with in your yard?”).

• Talk with twos about the sequence of events. Use time-order words like “first,” “next,” and “last.”

Keep in mind… Because twos are often so determined and independent, caregivers can inadvertently let directive language dominant their interactions with the children. Remember to take advantage of every opportunity to talk with children as they play and go through the normal routines of the day. Including more positive, conversational talk during the day builds children’s language skills and enhances the adult-child relationships, which has the added bonus of increasing children’s willingness to follow the adult’s lead when it is needed!