

Baby Talk & Beyond

Youngsters tune in to parents' words

When their son speaks in coos and gurgles, Joe and Bethany Labarge of Menasha are all ears.

"I try to interpret what the cooing is," Joe says, although he admits that he and his wife have no set translation system.

"We take care of him in separate shifts, so I interpret some of the things differently than she does," he says.

While parents love hearing their baby speak, just as important is what their babies are hearing from the people around them. Susan Ellis Weismer, a professor of communicative disorders and associate dean for research for the College of Letters and Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, offered insights into language development when she spoke in March at a Brain to Five session at Appleton North High School.

"Language is so fundamental," notes Weismer, whose speech was presented as part of the Appleton Education Foundation Community Education Series. "It's important for social skills, it's important for reading and it's important for academic abilities. So I see it as very much the cornerstone for everything that comes later."

With her topic "What does that gurgle really mean? Early language and your toddler," Weismer walked parents like the Labarges through the early stages of brain development.

"Language is one of those skills where there are critical periods," she says. "We can learn certain skills that are typically learned within a critical period after that window of opportunity has shut."

The first six months after birth are critical in developing the brain for language, she says. Children exposed to their native language will begin organizing their brain according to the sounds of the language, allowing the child to recognize certain noises and words.

"The brain will become set up or wired to listen to English sounds and children are then able to perceive very well the difference between r and l in English and p and b and

some of the other contrasts that we have in our language that don't occur in some of the other languages in the world," Weismer notes.

The next critical period that occurs is between 18 months and six years. This, Weismer says, is a time for grammar and putting words together to make meaningful sentences.

During this time children's brains are primed for listening to speech and picking up on the cues of language, Weismer says.

"Babies attend very well to a certain type of speech called parent-ese," Weismer says. Parent-ese, or child-directed language, is the type of speech used when speaking to children and babies.

"It's shown in studies that babies whose parents use more of this parent-ese language actually were quicker at being able to make the associations between words and the objects that the words referred to," Weismer says.

In her research, Weismer found late talkers had problems during the initial language learning stage, which included comprehending the connection between a word and its reference.

Along with using parent-ese to communicate with a baby or child, Weismer also suggests using books and daily



activities to stimulate a child's brain.

Investing in a collection of movies or learning videos isn't necessary, she says. Instead, use language learning opportunities such as grocery shopping or bath time to talk to your baby.

"A lot of people, especially for infants, feel funny talking to babies because they don't talk," Weismer says. "But it's very important to talk to a child early on so that they hear the sound of the language and they hear the words, so they get the idea of the communication game, the give and take of conversation."

Tammy Brooks, owner of The Learning Center Daycare in Winneconne, sees how infants respond to speech. She agrees communication is important, even for babies.

"There is a lot of one-on-one time between teacher and infant at the day care," says Brooks. "Whether they're changing diapers, holding or feeding a baby, teachers are always talking to the babies. It starts at a very young age."

To promote listening skills, Weismer suggests turning off the television and turning on audio tapes.

"Limit TV," she says. "TV can teach a lot of things, but it's not a substitute for human social interaction and language development.

"Audio tapes are great," she adds. "Songs or nursery rhymes, things that really get kids to cue in and listen, rather than passively watching a television show."

Reading books to a baby is also important, and can be a great bonding experience. Weismer had her middle school daughter read the Harry Potter book series to her, and they bonded as they shared the adventures.

"Read to your babies, read to your toddlers, read to your preschoolers, read to them until they can read back to you," Weismer says.

Interesting questions can also help a child learn a language, Weismer says, and are a great way to get kids thinking creatively.

"Pose questions like, what would it be like if we all lived under water?" Weismer suggests. "Get them to describe things and to use their language in an imaginative way."

Learn about your baby's brain

Parents can gain insights into how their young children's brains are developing through seminars presented by the Appleton Education Foundation and experts from the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Waisman Center.

The AEF Community Education Series - Brain to Five focuses on the intricacies of brain development in infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

The schedule includes:

- **Children's Emotions and the Developing Brain**, presented by Seth David Pollak, 7:30 p.m. April 23, Appleton North High School.
- **Shaping Your Child's Brain, Richard J. Davidson**, 7 p.m. May 13, Appleton East High School.

Language should be fun, because kids love to do silly things, Weismer says.

"The more you can experiment and have fun, the easier it is for them to learn and to be excited about using their language in various ways," Weismer says. ♦

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