

COMMENTARY

It's more than just baby talk



MCT illustration

Expert on early language, shaping brain to speak

Parents, especially anxious first-timers who devour every baby book, might panic when their child shows no inclination to speak, even as toddlers playing nearby jabber away with abandon.

Late talkers can cause many moms and dads fits but, in most cases, they need not worry, says brain investigator Susan Ellis Weismer, a professor of communicative disorders at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and a principal researcher with UW's Waisman Center.

Most children will do fine, Ellis Weismer said in a telephone interview last week. "There are always going to be kids who talk early and

Kathy Walsh Nufer

Post-Crescent
Staff Writer



those who talk late," she said. Fortunately, she added, "Most of the kids will move into the normal range. They might still not be a star, but they won't need intervention, either."

The importance of early language development cannot be underestimated, she said.

See NUFER, C-3

Brain to Five series

Wednesday: Susan Ellis Weismer on "What Does that Gurgle Really Mean? Early Language and Your Toddler," 7 p.m., Appleton North High School auditorium

April 2: Jenny Saffran on "How Babies Learn," 7 p.m., Appleton North High School auditorium

April 23: Seth David Pollak on "Children's Emotions and the Developing Brain," 7 p.m., Appleton North High School auditorium

May 13: Richie Davidson on "Shaping Your Child's Brain," 7 p.m., Appleton East High School

Admission: Free

On the Web

Developmental milestones for hearing, understanding and talking:
www.asha.org/public/speech/development/chart.htm

NUFER: Language development crucial to childhood

From C-1

"It is critical for social development — you have to be able to communicate — it is very important for academic reasons — you need to be able to listen and learn in school — and spoken language forms the basis for reading and writing."

Ellis Weismer, who has done brain research comparing typical talkers and late talkers, will share her findings at 7 p.m. Wednesday at Appleton North High School.

Her presentation is part of the "Brain to Five" series featuring Waisman "brain investigators" sponsored by the Appleton Education Foundation in partnership with Waisman.

"We think all parents, and others, will benefit from hearing this presentation," said Julie Krause, AEF executive director.

"Parents can't wait to hear their child's first word. If it

hasn't happened when the milestone checklist says it should, or when a friend's child started to talk, should they be concerned? Dr. Ellis Weismer will help us translate what those coos and gurgles babies make mean for language development."

Ellis Weismer said she plans to discuss the brain bases for language and the term "neuroplasticity, which really means we know changes can occur in the organization of the brain as the result of experience — either normal experience or experience following brain damage and recovery."

Ellis Weismer, who has also done research on language development in children with autism, said parents should be reassured most infants and toddlers learn language easily and naturally, without any kind of special intervention or help.

"Most parents have very good instincts about how to modify their language to young

children," she noted. "Some call it 'Mother-ese.' We call it child-directed language."

Parents' natural tendency to talk to infants and toddlers using different-size sentences and intonations are very useful in helping them "break into this language code," she said.

"From birth, infants start learning how to do 'reciprocal communication' and how to listen for human voices."

She will discuss studies on early word learning and a process called "fast mapping," the ability to hear a word once or twice and be able to be put meaning to it.

Ellis Weismer said parents should expose children to "lots of talking directed at them. There are all different levels of information that children are picking up every day about sounds, meanings of words, how we put words together in sentences and how we string sentences together to make bigger ideas and stories."

She advises parents who want to nurture language development to engage young kids in routines and games like "Peek-a-Boo" and rhyming exercises, read aloud to children so they listen to stories, limit TV and, instead of sitting them down with a video, give them audiotapes to help them hone their listening skills.

Ellis Weismer is also an advocate of early acquisition of foreign languages.

"In the preschool period, they soak up new language and there is no end to the number they can learn if exposed early," she said.

"They are not just learning a foreign language, but mental flexibility in being able to sustain attention. This is especially good for kids with attention deficit issues. I'm speculating, but I'd try that in a heartbeat rather than give them medication" right away.

Kathy Walsh Nuffer: 920-993-1000, ext. 290, or knufe@postcrescent.com