

How do Babies Learn to Talk and Understand Words and Language?

How Infant-Directed Speech Helps Babies Learn to Talk

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“Infant-directed speech” is a term researchers use to explain the way most adults speak to babies. The public simply calls this method of speaking “baby talk”. Call it infant-directed speech – call it baby talk – either way the mode of speaking can be bottles of fun when striving to grab and hold a baby’s attention.

Anyone who has ever used “baby talk” in efforts to communicate with newborn infants or small babies more than likely has seen how babies widen their eyes and stare toward high-pitched sounds coming from faces several times babies’ heads. Gaining an innocent baby’s attention can make an older person feel as if nothing throughout the world is more important to the baby than said person’s voice.

The reason it is possible to gain and hold a baby’s attention using baby talk is that babies are attracted to ascending vocal tones and slow speech patterns characteristic of infant-directed speech. They simply love voices that elevate pitch levels, utilize short sentences, and communicate in slow accentuated tones. It may be difficult for “baby talkers” to understand the few who actually find baby talk annoying and label it ridiculous, unnecessary, and speech stunting. Especially since besides enjoying infant-directed speech, babies become more alert when they hear this mode of speaking.

Fact is, researchers have maintained for years that babies prefer infant-directed speaking over adult monotone speaking. They have long believed that despite the fact infants eventually grow and begin using verbiage akin to other children and finally normal adults, learning and utilizing language is promoted when babies are spoken to using infant-directed speech. This theory has many aspects. In addition to intonation and shortened sentences mentioned above, infant-directed speech also makes use of factors researchers term "novel focused" words at ends of sentences, simplified sentence structures, and exaggerated phrase markings.

Novel focused words are words adults emphasize in sentences such as, "Wh-e-re-s the ba-a-by?" in which "where" and "baby" are the focus. Emphasizing novel focused words helps infants distinguish these words and, in affect, add familiarized words to their intellect-based vocabulary. Researchers also believe cadences formed from simplified sentence structures and exaggerated phrase markings coupled with repetitive word sequences helps babies learn word recognition.

Although researchers have long been aware that baby talk might actually aid, rather than hamper babies' abilities to learn and understand language, the biggest theory-proving breakthrough came in a 2005 research study conducted by Professor Erik Thiessen a Carnegie Mellon University Psychologist and a panel of his colleagues.

Professor Thiessen conducted two similar experiments that were similar in all aspects except number and age of baby participants and length of experimentation. The second series of tests conducted were to answer questions left by the first test series.

Test two consisted of fifty babies, ages seven and a half to eight and a half months old. The babies were divided into two groups. One baby group tested for responses to nonsense words using infant-directed speech and the other group tested for

responses to nonsense words using "adult-directed speech". Experimental results showed babies in the infant-directed group distinguished between more words and part words (incorporated in the nonsense word phrases) than did babies in the adult-directed group. In furtherance, babies in the infant-directed group found it easier to segment words versus part words in the nonsense sentences than did babies in the adult-directed group.

Professor Thiessen's tests are clear indications that infant-directed speech helps babies learn to decipher and understand words faster and easier than adult-directed speech. Part of the reasoning for this advanced learning is believed to do with the fact that heightened tones, exaggerated word emphasis, repetition and other characteristics associated with infant-directed speech grabs and holds infant attention and makes babies focus on language as opposed to other stimulus.

Using nonsense words assured Thiessen that eight-month-olds participating in his investigation had not previously heard words they expected to learn and show knowledge of during the two-minute test sessions. Thanks to his experiments we can all rest assure that infant-directed speech helps babies learn language and does not hamper their speech.

It is important to reiterate the fact that infant-directed speech helps babies learn and decipher language as opposed to learning to actually speak which involves anatomical processes. Obviously, persons can communicate language in other ways than talking. There is reading, writing, signing and so on. Without actual knowledge of language, methods of communicating a language would be impossible.

With the above said, it must also be emphasized that babies who are not spoken to with infant-direct speech will still learn language. The difference between learning from infant-directed speech and adult-directed monotone speech is simply that babies learn to understand language faster than when

they're only spoken to as little adults.