

Especially for practitioners working with infants!

Talking Pointers

Vocalizing and Listening

Early childhood professionals know that it is never too early to have conversations with infants. Talking to very young children introduces them to the world of voices, sounds, and words. This will help them learn how to communicate with others.

What is the practice?

Babies love to hear the voices of familiar people. Infants become especially attuned to things they hear when talked to in interesting ways. Talking to infants using a combination of adult speech and child-directed speech ("baby talk") can be especially interesting to infants. "Baby talk" is a form of child-directed speech in which an adult talks to a child in a simplified, exaggerated, and repetitive manner. "Baby talk" can also be called "parentese" or "motherese." This practice will surely get a child looking and "talking" to you by making all kinds of sounds. Check out the Child-Directed Speech Dictionary practice guide for some other baby talk ideas.



What does the practice look like?

Opportunities to have conversations with infants happen anytime you and one or more infants in your classroom are together. Imagine holding an infant in your arms, while the infant is looking up at you. You start "talking" to the infant, asking, "You see me, don't you?" The infant begins to move and gets excited. "You hear me talking to you." The child gets even more excited. You introduce baby talk into the conversation. You speak in a slow and exaggerated manner when you say, "Does little (child's name) hear me talking? (Child's name) is so, soooo cuuute!"

How do you do the practice?

- The child should be in a comfortable position where you can easily look at each other. Holding him in your arms or laying him face-up stretched out on your legs generally works well.
- Start the conversation by saying anything that gets the infant's attention (e.g., "How is [child's name] today?") If you are about to feed the infant, you can say something like, "It's time for [child's name] to eat. Are you hungry?" It is best to use words that make sense in terms of what you and the child are doing together.
- Follow the child's lead. Watch for signs or signals that tell you he hears or is paying attention to your voice. Some infants get "bright-eyed," while others move their bodies to show their excitement.
- Begin adding baby talk into the conversation. "(Child's name) is soooo cuuute. (Child's name) is such a preeetty baaby!" Speak softly, slowly, and in a manner that exaggerates the sounds in the words.
- Switch back and forth between adult speech and baby talk during the conversation with the child. It will heighten his attention to what is being said and will likely get him more involved.
- Do not worry about the infant understanding what you are saying. The main idea is to get the child involved in the conversation.

How do you know the practice worked?

- Does the child pay close attention to your face and mouth?
- Does he respond differently to adult speech and baby talk?
- Does he vocalize and get excited as part of the conversation?

Take a look at more talking pointers

Mealtime Chit-Chat

Six-month-old Zachary is about to be fed his bottle. He knows to expect that his caregiver, Mia, will be talking to him in her funny voice! Mia is holding Zachary in her arms so that they can look at each other. "Is Zach hungry?" she asks. Zachary looks up at Mia while opening his mouth, anticipating the nipple being put in his mouth. Mia continues by saying, "Yum, yum, yum. Zach is eating like a good little boy. He loves his ba-ba doesn't he?" in a high-pitched, sing-song voice. Anytime Mia uses baby talk, Zachary gets bright-eyed and blows bubbles with his milk! The whole feeding episode is filled with a back-and-forth conversation between Zachary and Mia.



Appealing 'Baby Talk'

Brianna's father is putting on her coat for them to go to the store with their home visitor, Asa. "Are we getting ready to go bye-bye?" Asa asks Brianna. Excitement spreads all over her from head to foot! Five-month-old Brianna starts smiling and vocalizing. Asa responds by saying, "We have to go to the store to get Brianna some food for din-din. What should we get?" Brianna looks at her dad and joins in by starting to vocalize. Dad says to her, "You are such a preeetty little girl. Daddy loves you soooo, soooo much" in a high-pitched voice. Brianna loves it when her father talks to her this way. The more animated and exaggerated her dad's voice and expression, the more Brianna talks back.

Slow and Silly

An early interventionist has helped Evan's father figure out a great way to talk to his 7-month old son. Getting Evan to hang on every sound and sign his father makes is especially important because of Evan's hearing impairment. Evan's father talks to him in a high-pitched voice with exaggerated sounds together with big, exaggerated sign language. He does this no matter the activity—during mealtimes, while bathing Evan, while they are playing, or any other time. One of Evan's favorite activities is outdoor play because he has so much fun with his father. Evan's father acts very silly and makes slow, exaggerated mouth movements when he is playing in the yard with Evan. "Up in the tree house!" Evan's father says as he signs up and opens his mouth wide. Evan opens his mouth as much as he can as well. Both father and son are "hooked" on each other's every movement!

