



Baby Babble: A Stepping Stone to Words

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“...babababaa...dadidididi...mamamama...”

These strings of babbled sounds might seem like gibberish, but they actually signal a very important stage in children’s language development. In fact, a recent study found that the age at which a baby starts to babble predicts when he will say his first words^[1].

How does babbling develop?

Babies make sounds right from the time they are born – in fact, they announce their arrival with a loud cry! During the first six months, babies learn to make other sounds besides crying, such as cooing and laughing. These early sounds are not made on purpose; they are a reflex that the baby doesn’t consciously control.

Then, between approximately five to 10 months of age, babies’ sounds start to change^[2]. They begin to make syllables, such as “ba ba” or “di di” that include a consonant and a vowel. These types of babbled sounds are referred to as **canonical babbling**, which involves either strings of repeated syllables (e.g. “da da da”) or combinations of different syllables (e.g. “ma di da”). Canonical babbling is a major milestone in a baby’s development of language because these types of syllables closely resemble those he will produce when he begins using words^[3].

As babies continue to develop, their babbling begins to sound more and more like conversation. This is sometimes referred to as **jargon**, and this babble has a rhythm and tone which sounds a lot like adult speech.

After about a year of making various sounds and syllables, young children start to say their first words.

Some things to know about babbling

- The sounds, rhythm and tone in babble are influenced by the language the baby is exposed to.^[1] Babies babble using the sounds they hear around them.
- The consonants used in a baby's babble are usually the consonants that appear in his first words.^[1]
- Babies who are exposed to more than one language babble as much as babies exposed to only one language.^[4]
- Children who are delayed in their development of sounds or babble are at risk for a communication delay.^[4,5]

Responding to your child's babble

Some babbling is very purposeful, and you can tell that your child is sending you a clear message about something that catches his attention. But sometimes it's unclear whether babbling has a message behind it, and it can be difficult to know how to respond when your child is playing around with sounds.

Here are some tips to help you notice your child's babble and know how to respond:

- **Pause and wait for your child to babble** – When children aren't yet talking, it's easy to fill the space with your own talking. But if you sometimes say nothing and just wait for your child to initiate, you will encourage him to make sounds when he is ready.
- **Observe your child** – Observing your child carefully when he babbles will let you know if his babble is meant to send you a message or not. If you observe your child looking at or pointing to something while he babbles, or trying to get your attention, it's likely that his babble is intentional and meant to send you a specific message. If you observe your child babbling while he is busy playing and not trying to get your attention, it may be that your child is playing with sounds and practicing his new skills.
- **Imitate your child's babble** – If you've figured out that your child isn't sending you a specific message by babbling, a great strategy is to imitate his sounds. When you copy your child's sounds, it shows him that you are paying attention to him and that his sounds caught your interest. This might motivate him to babble again, and this could turn into a game of copycat! These types of imitation games build your child's ability to take turns, interact, and pay attention to you. They also encourage your child to intentionally make sounds to get your attention.
- **Act as your child's interpreter** – If you think your child is trying to tell you something specific when he babbles, put his message into words. For example, if your child looks at a car out the window and says "bababa", you could interpret this by saying, "There's a car," while you point to the car yourself. When you interpret your child's message in this way, you provide labels for the things he is trying to communicate about. This will eventually build his vocabulary.

If your child is not babbling...

If you think your child is late to start using sounds or babble, talk to a speech language pathologist, who can evaluate whether this is cause for concern. For information about other important communication milestones, have a look at our article [When should you seek help?](#)

References

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About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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