

Infants & Toddlers

a letter to families

NOTE TO TEACHERS: COPY THIS PAGE AND SEND HOME TO PARENTS.

We've been enjoying lots of activities at school to build your infants' and toddlers' language skills. By carefully attending to the way you communicate with your children, you can help build these skills as well. Here are some things you can do at home:

Speak clearly. You are the primary language teacher of your little one from day one! As you diaper, cuddle, carry, soothe, undress, clothe, play with, and read to your child, your clear words and loving talk help him make sense of this new world.

Talk about yourself to baby! Whenever you are busy preparing food, tell your baby all about what you are doing. Explain how you are boiling an egg, reaching up on a shelf to get down some crackers, or mixing milk into a bowl of oatmeal. If you have to go out of a room to fetch more diapers, or bring in a toy left in another room, be sure and tell your baby about your actions. When you leave your child with a teacher, be sure and tell your baby how much you love her. Be specific about when you are coming back at pick-up time: "after your nap" or "after you play outside with your friends in the afternoon."

Talk about the things you see your baby doing. "Hi honey! You sure are creeping fast across the rug. You are creeping across the rug so you can reach your ball." If your child is placing pegs in a pegboard, pouring water from a plastic cup, or rolling a car back and forth, label the items, the gestures, the actions of your child. With each word you say, you are giving a special gift. Your child will develop "receptive language" successfully, so that lots of language is understood even when talking (expressive language) comes more slowly, as it does for some tots.

Chant and sing as you carry out daily chores. "This is the way we wash our toes,

wash our toes, wash our toes" can be repeated for every body part during bath time. Nouns are easier to learn, but actions, such as "sit" or "roll the ball" or "go get your Baby Bear book from the shelf, please," are also easy for toddlers to learn when parents use clear words and body language (such as pointing) to help a child understand the words.

Plan outings. Outings provide another way to teach more words, such as "stroller," "grass," "car seat," "buckle," or "swings." Outdoor playtime not only gives your toddler a chance to expend energy safely, but also to learn whole new sets of words. (*See the Honig & Brophy book, *Talking With Your Baby: Family as the First School*.) Think of every new experience as offering possibilities for your child to learn lots of new words and expressions.

Be sure to use words for emotions. Use emotion words such as "sad," "mad," and "glad" with babies. Some toddlers understand "frustrated" or "grumpy" very well too! Teach courtesy words early, even when a toddler has only a vague idea of why "please" or "sorry" is necessary! Accept any and all pronunciations as you model clearly but do not correct. Remember, you and your child's teacher are your child's most precious guides into the awesome world of language.

* *Talking With Your Baby: Family As the First School*, by Alice Honig and Holly Elisabeth Brophy (Syracuse University Press, 1996; \$16.95)

Alice Sterling Honig, Ph.D., a professor emerita of child development at Syracuse University, is the author of many books, including *Secure Relationships: Nurturing Infant-Toddler Attachments in Early Care Settings* (NAEYC, 2002; \$15) and, with H. Brophy, *Talking With Your Baby: Family as the First School* (Syracuse University Press, 1996; \$16.95).