



A renewed focus

Promoting the importance of nurturing relationships in language development for babies and young children

Babies and young children are born ready to learn how to communicate. Research has steadily supported the importance of warm, nurturing relationships in the development of language. At home and in high quality community child care, young children absorb and learn language best through repeated “serve and return” interactions with an engaged adult. Not only do children learn how to interact, listen, and express ideas and feelings, but also how to problem solve, develop a sense of self, gain an understanding of the world around them, and make sense of learned experiences.

Has COVID-19 impacted early language development? In a single word: YES! Early research studies on the impact of the pandemic on child development show that important interactions between young children, their peers, and adults has changed. With the closure of child care centers, changes in parents' employment and juggling other responsibilities, changes in family routines, and increases in passive screen time, critical social interactions have been disrupted.

While the long-term impact of COVID-19 on language development remains unclear, a recent study in Rhode Island found that “Children born during the pandemic have significantly reduced verbal, motor, and overall cognitive performance compared to children born pre-pandemic.” Researchers tracked 1700 children between 2010 and 2021 using the Mullen Scales of Early Learning, a standardized developmental test for children (ages 3-60 months) which measures development across five key domains: gross motor, fine motor, visual receptive, expressive language, and receptive language. “For children born during the pandemic, results on the Mullen Scale corresponded to an average IQ score of 78, which represented a 22 point drop from the previous average. The effect was larger in boys than in girls.” (Sparks, S.D. April, 07, 2022. Babies are saying less since the pandemic: Why it’s concerning. <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/babies-are-saying-less-since-the-pandemic-why-thats-concerning/2022/04>)

Why is this important for us to know?

Being aware of the origin and potential changes in language growth within young children during the last few years, reminds us to check-in with the children and families we serve:

- making sure to model positive interactions throughout the day with children in our care
- being aware of what to watch for in the development of young children
- sharing resources and supports with families, guiding them as they encourage their child's language development
- celebrating families as they notice everyday language development opportunities

Support and engage families to notice if their baby or child:

- responds to name being called or other environmental sounds
- vocalizes or uses gestures/body movements to communicate by 6 months
- babbles by 9 months
- says first word by 15 months
- uses consistent words by 18 months
- combines words by 24 months
- adds more words together over time
- speaks clearly (clear enough for familiar caregivers to understand by 24 months and by 36 months for those not familiar to the child)
- is interested in communicating or trying to use language

Providers can reach out to their regional [WV Infant/Toddler Specialists](#) for additional support and resources. Providers should also share their observations and/or concerns with the family and encourage the family to reach out to the child's primary care physician, [West Virginia Birth to Three](#), or [Help Me Grow](#) for additional supports and resources.

Resources

- [CDC Developmental Milestones](#)
- [CDC Milestones Tracker App](#)
- [Center for Early Literacy Learning](#)
- [Center on the Developing Child Harvard University](#)
- [Child Mind Institute – Helping Toddlers with Language Skills](#)
- [NAEYC: 12 Ways to Support Language Development for Infants/Toddlers](#)
- [The Littlest Linguists: New Research on Language Development \(Association for Psychological Science\)](#)
- [It's Time to Move Beyond the Word Gap](#)
- [Language Acquisition](#)
- [The Speech Stop – Help with Language](#)
- [ZERO to THREE - Your Child's Development](#)
- [ZERO to THREE - Healthy Minds](#)
- [ZERO to THREE - Ways to Build Babies Language and Communication Skills from Birth](#)

For more information about the West Virginia Infant/Toddler Mental Health Association, please visit:

www.nurturingwvbabies.org