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How Parents Can Support Language Development in Children Approaching Age Two: What to Know and What to Do

Xiao Huang

Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Chongqing, China

Abstract

How to help children develop language or how to maximize language learning is a topic that parents care deeply about. As speech is the fundamental tool children use to communicate and share information, it is important for parents to understand how language develops in children so they can help their children develop language skills in proper ways. For example, parents of a child who is about to turn two years old and is in the early stage of language learning may seek information about how to facilitate communication skills. This paper will discuss the language development process and theories, as well as factors that influence language learning, to help parents gain a basic understanding of how language is acquired by young children. Theories and factors will be introduced with reference to children approaching two years old. Examples will be provided to illustrate language development theories and facts, along with practical suggestions for parents to support the language development of young children.

Keywords

early language development, parental support, language acquisition, preschool language learning

1. Introduction

Many parents care a lot about their children's language development as language is used for communication. Communication is the process of "sharing information among two or more persons" (Pence Turnbull & Justice, 2016). It involves four steps: formulation, where the speaker generates the message based on their thoughts and intentions; transmission, where the formulated message is expressed and sent through speech, writing, gestures, or other means; reception, where the recipient receives the message through their sensory systems, such as hearing or sight; and comprehension, where the recipient interprets and makes sense of the message to understand its meaning (Pence Turnbull & Justice, 2016). When talking about the way to communicate, it often refers to the transmission step. That is, how the thoughts of the sender are conveyed to the receiver. Language is one way humans use to communicate. It is complex, and it requires multiple components (semantics, syntax, morphology, phonology, and pragmatics) to work together to ensure that we convey and receive the intended message in our communication (Owens, 2015). So how are language skills acquired by children? This is actually a debatable topic among researchers and scholars in the field of language acquisition. Two major language development theories are the Behaviorist Theory (nurture approach) and the Universal Grammar Theory (nature approach).

2. Two Main Theories of Language Development

B. F. Skinner, leader of the Behaviorist theory, believes that language is acquired through "learning and reinforcement" (Skinner, 1957). He stated that species, including both animals and human beings, acquire new skills either through classical conditioning or operant conditioning (Skinner, 1957). That is, the environment is the key factor determining humans' language acquisition. However, linguist Noam Chomsky, supporter of the nativist approach, stated that language acquisition is biological (Chomsky, 1965). In fact, he proposed the Universal Grammar Theory, claiming that human beings have a "species-specific module dedicated to language learning" (Chomsky, 1986). Contrary to Skinner, Chomsky believes that language acquisition is innate and pre-programmed in the human brain; while the capacity for language is innate, there is a biological time limit for acquiring the full structure of language, especially grammar (Chomsky, 1965, 1986). To help parents facilitate their children's language learning, it first needs to be decided which theory to follow, since different theories imply different approaches, and could lead to varying strategies and techniques for language support.

Genie's case is a famous example often discussed in language acquisition studies. She was a girl who was severely isolated and deprived of language exposure until the age of thirteen. After being rescued, researchers studied her language development to see whether she could still acquire language. Researchers observed and concluded that Genie's language acquisition ability was not regained although she was reintroduced to people and society (Curtiss, 1977). Although she learned some vocabulary, she still could not form grammatical sentences. This suggests that even if a person is exposed to a "normal" learning environment, their language acquisition can still be lacking (Curtiss, 1977). This conclusion seems contrary to what Skinner's Behaviorist theory claims. Genie's case suggests that language acquisition may not be fully attained through "operant conditioning." Chomsky's theory that nature inspires language learning may provide a more convincing explanation. Genie's case offers support to Chomsky's Universal Grammar Theory, as the theory proposes that language is unique to humans and that the ability to learn and speak a language is an innate ability of the brain, but this ability must be activated by exposure to language during a sensitive critical period (Chomsky, 1965, 1986). It should be noted, however, that environmental factors are not completely powerless in affecting children's language learning. Although Skinner's idea that children's language acquisition is determined by outside factors may not fully explain the process, environmental factors can still influence children's language development.

3. Infants' Language Development Timelines

Just as language ability in children is similar to a pre-installed program on a computer, typical language development timelines and milestones exist. According to Pence Turnbull and Justice (2016), babies are typically able to produce their first word at about 12 months old. Before that, they widely use gestures to communicate with their parents and people around them. Although they continue to use gestures after they are able to speak their first word, they begin to use words and later on sentences to communicate. At about the age of 18 months old, children can produce about 50 words on average; and from 12 months to 18 months, infants' vocabulary increases by approximately 8.2 words per month (Pence Turnbull & Justice, 2016). These timelines are generally supported by observations of infants' language development. It is common sense that at birth, the only sound babies can make is crying. But as days go on, they gain the ability to babble and react to people's talk. Their language development follows a predictable pattern. For example, many parents expect their babies to speak their first word (often the word "mom") around one year old, which is consistent with the general timeline of children's language acquisition.

Pence Turnbull and Justice (2016) indicated that for children around 20 to 22 months old, they should be able to produce more than 50 words. If their vocabulary is limited to below 25 words, then concerns may be warranted, and they might have a severe language learning deficiency because the cut-off vocabulary for 21-month-old children is 25 (Pence Turnbull & Justice, 2016). It is recommended that parents check whether the child has any language, speech, or hearing disorders before proceeding to discuss how to facilitate language development. Some signs of disorders parents could watch for include saying k, g, f, t, d, and n incorrectly in words; struggling to say sounds or words; and not understanding what others say (American Speech-

Language-Hearing Association, n.d.). Therefore, if a child is experiencing severe language learning problems, it is most urgent for parents to take the child to see speech-language pathologists and audiologists.

4. Parental Support for Children Approaching Age Two

Now let's assume that no language disorders are present, and the child approaching two years old is developing language at a typical level. Therefore, it is possible to proceed with discussing how to facilitate the child's language learning. According to Pence Turnbull and Justice (2016), "caregivers provide the conduit through which a child learns about language and communication". Parents play a vital role in their children's language development since the home is where children first begin to acquire language and literacy experiences (Byington & Kim, 2025). How parents communicate with their children greatly affects their children's language acquisition. For example, one of the word learning principles and cues is that children use "social cues" to guess people's intention; they try to figure out what other people mean by saying something (Yow et al., 2017). This process is very beneficial to children's language learning. Another example that illustrates the importance of caregivers' input to children's language learning is from the research by Weizman and Snow (2001). They found that "the lexical diversity in parental speech at 16 months is related to child vocabulary size at 24 months" (Weizman & Snow, 2001).

According to the general timeline of children's language development, as a child approaches two years of age, the child can produce or is about to produce sentences (Pence Turnbull & Justice, 2016). It is normal that these sentences are as short as two words and may not have tense and agreement, but the child is making progress in language learning. Sentences with tense and agreement will be produced gradually over time. There are things parents can do to help accelerate the productivity of sentences with tense and agreement.

Input informativeness is testified to be a strong predictor affecting productivity growth. It refers to how clearly and frequently parents model correct grammatical structures, such as tense and agreement, in their speech (Hadley et al., 2011). Therefore, it is suggested that parents communicate with their children using full tense and agreement sentences so children can learn from the input and be able to produce sentences with tense and agreement sooner. For example, instead of saying "want more," parents can say, "do you want more"; in this way, agreement is added to the sentence and children can learn that. Statistical data suggests that input informativeness for tense explains 28.3 percent of morphosyntactic growth at 21 months and 23.0 percent of tense productivity at 30 months, so it is recommended that parents pay attention and think about what they are going to say before they actually say it; an additional 24.7 percent of the variance is explained by child sex (Hadley et al., 2011). It was discussed that boys may learn more slowly than girls at this early stage of language acquisition. Therefore, boys' parents should not worry if they notice that their children's language acquisition is slightly slower than some same-age girls, since gender differences account for part of the variation.

Environmental factors also influence children's language development (Skinner, 1957). As aforementioned, although these exogenous factors do not have a determining effect on children's language development, they show some levels of influence. For instance, auditory stimuli greatly influence infants' language development in both positive and negative ways (Benasich et al., 2014). Good auditory stimuli can benefit children's language learning while the opposite may actually do harm to it. Since parents nowadays may explore different software and videos that promise to accelerate a child's language development and wonder if these products can actually benefit their child's language development, the effects of software and videos are discussed here.

According to Close (2004), an independent researcher in this field, there is no clear evidence showing that TV or video programs that claim to promote language learning in children are beneficial to children's language development. On the contrary, he stated that these programs might even harm children's language development. He pointed out that children who are two years old or younger generally do not understand most of the contents, making it insufficient for them to learn from these programs. That is to say, for children approaching two years old, these educational video programs and software are not likely to benefit their language development even though the programs and software may claim they could. A more beneficial way for young children's language learning is through interaction with adults, but "extensive exposures to

television may mean that interaction with adults is reduced" (Close, 2004). So even though these software and video programs may have some beneficial effects, compared with parent-child interaction, their effects are much less effective.

5. Parental Support for Children Beyond Age Two

However, the research indicated that situations are different for older children (e.g., two to five years old) (Close, 2004). The researcher stated that "good-quality" educational TV and video programs promote language development in children between two to five years old. He wrote in his research that watching "age-appropriate" programs actually helps children develop vocabulary, comprehension, and knowledge of expressive language (Close, 2004). But he emphasized that this conclusion is only applicable to "good-quality" educational programs. Therefore, for children above two years old, parents may consider using educational software and video products to support their children's language development. However, it is important that parents know how to choose appropriate and effective software and video products. It might be better for them to consult a professional before actually purchasing any particular product.

Although the focus here is on children approaching two years old, it is also important for parents to know how they can continue to help their children in language learning when approaching the preschool stage. According to Pence Turnbull and Justice (2008), children at about three years old begin to develop literacy language knowledge (Pence Turnbull & Justice, 2016). Therefore, it would be helpful if parents could support their children in literacy development at this stage. Literacy and print referencing are "particularly amenable to facilitating children's development" in print concepts, concept of word, and alphabet knowledge (Pence Turnbull & Justice, 2016). A clinical-based literacy intervention experiment also provided evidence that print is helpful in promoting preschoolers' language learning (Mendelsohn et al., 2001). In this experiment, 122 study participants were assigned to either the intervention group (49 participants) or the comparison group (73 participants). Intervention families were exposed to intense ROR (Reach Out and Read), while comparison families were not. The result showed that ROR is "an important intervention, promoting parental support and enhancing language development in impoverished preschool children" (Mendelsohn et al., 2001). It is recommended that parents read printed materials like stories to their children; additionally, they can "interact experiences with language and print through poems, nursery rhymes, and songs" to help children gain literacy skills (Ford, n.d.).

Another way to help preschoolers' language learning is through play. The National Association for the Education of Young Children has included play as a criterion in its accreditation process for programs for young children (GreatSchools Editorial Team, 2025). For example, play offers opportunities for children to interact and even work as a team with other children. Thus, children have more chances to communicate with different people, which is very beneficial to their language development. Since most "play" events are held by kindergartens, what parents need to do is to choose a good kindergarten for their children to attend in the future.

6. Conclusion

Understanding how children's language develops is of vital importance for parents to assist their children in language acquisition. Although different theories have different focuses, parents can examine and incorporate them in a customized way to find what is most useful for their child's specific developmental timeline and situation. In this paper, parental support strategies have been discussed, including providing rich verbal interaction, modeling correct grammar structures, offering high-quality educational media after age two, encouraging literacy activities such as shared reading and print referencing, and promoting language-rich play experiences. It should be emphasized that parents' support strategies may differ significantly before and after their children reach two years old.

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