



The Power of Early Conversations: How Infant Communication Shapes Future Success

doi: 10.15173/sw.v1i3.3830

Author: Parneet Deo¹

¹McMaster University, Faculty of Health Science, Biomedical Commercialization & Discovery 2025

Illustrator: Angela Liu

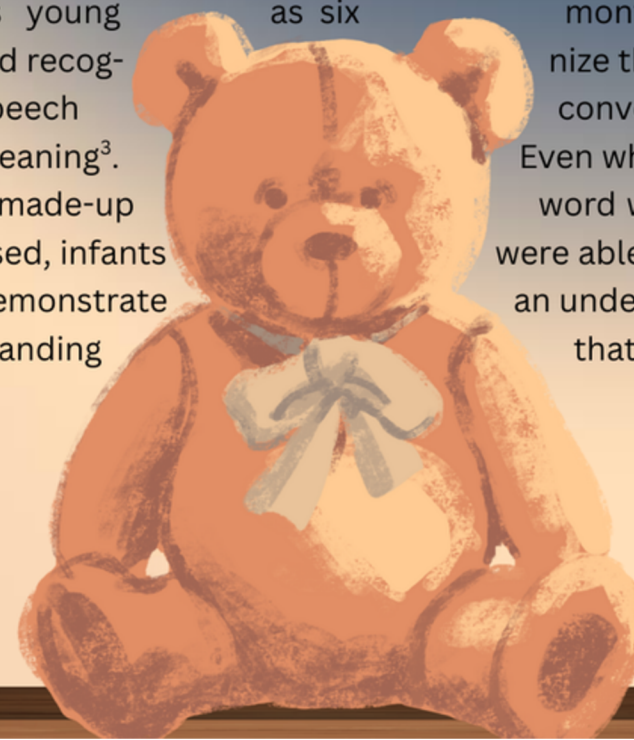
³McMaster University, Faculty of Science, Life Sciences Gateway 2028

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a world where infants never hear words, never see smiles, and never experience the warmth of conversation. Would they ever truly learn to communicate? While many assume that language acquisition happens naturally, research suggests that without proper parental engagement, infants miss critical opportunities for communication development¹. Parental support during infancy is not just beneficial, it is essential for shaping a child's future language abilities and social interactions in ways that cannot be replicated later in life. Due to this, it is important to invest in early education and support new parents.

THE FOUNDATION OF COMMUNICATION STARTS AT INFANCY

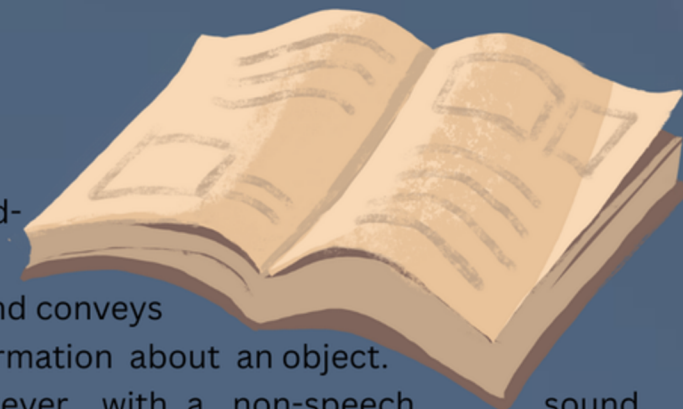
Infants may not speak in full sentences, but their communication skills begin developing the moment they enter the world. Crying, cooing, and facial expressions are their primary tools for signalling needs and engaging with caregivers². These early interactions set the stage for future language development. Studies have shown that infants as young as six months old recognize that word-like sound conveys meaning³. Even when a made-up word was used, infants were able to demonstrate an understanding that



word-like sound conveys information about an object. However, with a non-speech sound, such as a cough, they demonstrated that that sound does not convey information. This indicates that they are biologically wired to absorb language, but without parental reinforcement, this ability can stagnate³.

THE EFFECTS OF INCREASED POSITIVE INTERACTIONS: WHO IS IMPORTANT?

It has been shown that increased parental involvement through reading, engaging in daily activities, and responding to an infant's cues leads to better communication and vocabulary development by the age of two. 4 It has been observed that to improve infant communication and vocabulary, parents can read to their infants daily⁴. Even little steps, including consistent time together, such as grocery shopping, improves communication as it allows infants to watch parents in action. To further emphasize the importance of enhancing communication early, research by McCleery et al. (2012) suggests that infants' gross motor development is related to communication abilities⁵. This correlation is likely due to infants with better communication skills having more positive interactions with peers and caregivers over



the two years. This demonstrates that the interactions can come from anyone, not just the parents themselves. This highlights that the early years are a critical window of opportunity. Parents who frequently talk to their infants, repeat nursery rhymes, name objects, and respond to their baby's cries help lay a foundation for strong communication skills. On the other hand, infants who experience minimal verbal interaction may struggle with language acquisition later in life, impacting their social and cognitive abilities⁶. Language development is not just about exposure to words, it is about emotional connection. When parents respond to their infant's cries with comfort rather than frustration, they reinforce the idea that communication is effective and meaningful. Infants raised in environments rich in verbal and emotional engagement develop not only better communication skills but also a greater sense of security and social competence⁷.

WHY IS INFANCY A CRITICAL WINDOW FOR COMMUNICATION?

Some argue that communication abilities develop as children grow, regardless of early parental involvement. However, case studies, like the Genie, contradict this notion proving that children from environments with



PREVERBAL COMMUNICATION IS SO IMPORTANT!

argue that communication abilities develop as children grow, regardless of early parental involvement. However, case studies, like the Genie, contradict this notion proving that children from environments with

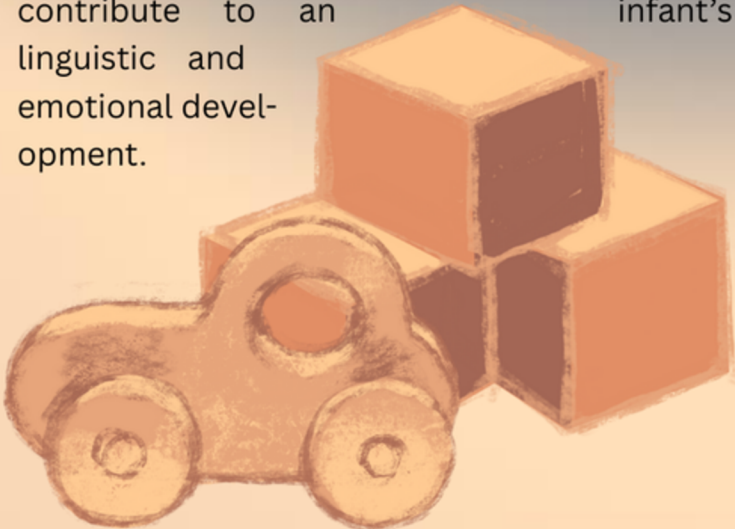
low parental engagement often face language deficits that persist into adolescence⁸. While interventions later in life can help, Genie's story shows how they cannot fully compensate for the missed foundational years of language learning. Furthermore, the benefits of early parental engagement extend beyond communication, influencing cognitive development, emotional regulation, and social skills⁸.

A 6-month-old infant can't talk yet, so how do we know that these interventions help improve communication immediately rather than their communication improving with time and experience? Infants' communication can be measured by their eye gaze, displays of emotion, and whether or not they attempt to catch their caretaker's attention. A study by Cates et al. (2012) measured how these communication techniques are affected by cognitive stimulation at 6 months old, and

how this predicts language development later at 24 months. 320 mother-infant groups participated, with infants at 6 months of age. Parental cognitive stimulation was assessed through the presence of learning materials (e.g., toys), engagement in reading activities, involvement in teaching, and responsiveness to infants. At 12 months of age, these now toddlers' language skills were tested. It was found that increased infant cognitive stimulation leads to increased toddler language and communication, with early experiences affecting how children acquire language. Of the cognitive stimulation techniques studied, no single one was the most linked to communication and language outcomes and are all important⁹.

CONCLUSION: AN INVESTMENT IN THE FUTURE

Parental support in infancy is not merely an advantage, it is a necessity. Infants who receive consistent verbal and emotional engagement develop superior language skills, emotional intelligence, and social adaptability. However, raising a child is often said to require a village. While parents play the primary role in fostering communication, caregivers, family members, and even community initiatives can contribute to an infant's linguistic and emotional development.



To ensure every child has the opportunity to develop strong communication skills, we must advocate for policies and programs that support early childhood development. This includes promoting parental leave policies that allow for increased bonding time, expanding access to affordable childcare with trained caregivers who emphasize language-rich environments, and increasing public awareness campaigns that educate families on the importance of early interactions. Furthermore, pediatricians and early childhood educators can play a crucial role by encouraging parents to engage in simple but meaningful activities, such as reading, singing, and responsive interactions, that enhance communication skills from infancy. Community programs, such as library story hours, playgroups, and parent support networks, can help bridge the gap for families who may lack resources or knowledge about early language development. Investing in early communication is an investment in the future. By prioritizing these efforts, we lay the foundation for a generation of articulate, confident, and socially competent individuals. The path to strong communication begins at birth, and it starts with all of us.

Edited By: Noor Arora & Jennifer Chen