DON'T PLAY PLAY!
A First-Time Mummy’s Guide To Child Play For Optimal Linguistic Development
Dear First-Time Mummy,

You’re only a few months, or weeks, perhaps even days shy of welcoming your little bundle of joy. Congratulations! A new adventure awaits your family and we are so excited for you. 😊 As with any adventure, it always helps to have a compass and map in hand to ensure you’re always headed in the right direction. Here’s where we come in!

Did you know that your child’s first year is very important to his early language development? That’s right! Your baby’s language is developing even before he starts talking! Now, before you start panicking about the 1001 things you think you need to do with your child once you give birth… Stop. Breathe. And all we ask of you, is Play. You read that right - Play! Our guide aims to help you and your child Play the Right Way so that his language development can benefit the most from play time.

With Love,
Siti Nur Atiqah
HOW MUCH LANGUAGE DOES MY CHILD KNOW IN HIS FIRST YEAR?

So, it’s day 1 post-birth and as you stare at your new miracle with much awe, you start to wonder, “There’s so much that this one has yet to learn. Where do I even begin?” Well, guess what Mummy? Firstly, he already knows a great deal of things. Secondly, the time to teach him language is now.

While new-borns may not fully understand what you say to them from the get-go, there are many other features of a language that they can recognise. For example, did you know that new-borns can tell apart two different languages solely based on how they sound? [15] They can also tell apart their mother’s voice from others’! [1] Therefore, your child’s language capability is already developing the moment he is born, and you do not have to wait until he starts babbling or cooing to teach him new words.

Also, psychologically speaking, your child’s first year is important as the number of synapses in his brain is at its peak during this period. **Synapses** help the brain to recognise and remember different sounds of a language which will be the basis for later language learning. [2]
In Singapore, parents of nuclear families are often working, and their children are put under the care of a grandparent or a childcare centre. However, this does not mean that there is nothing you can do to aid your child’s language development. In fact, setting aside just 5 minutes of play every day can make an enormous difference!

You may think that speaking to your child during routine activities (such as mealtimes or bath times) is enough to develop his language. Unfortunately, this is not the case. During routine times, the words you speak to your child tend to be repetitive as the actions that you do with him are often the same. After all, how many new ways can we think of to tell our children to open their mouths for food? As such, there are not many new words that your child will be exposed to. During play time, however, there are a lot of ways to play with the same toy and different types of information that you can use to describe the toy to your child like its colour, shape and use. As such, the vocabularies that you introduce to him will be wider during play time compared to routine times. [12]

Furthermore, you would be speaking more words during play time as you have to consistently communicate with your child for play time to occur. [10] Routine time, on the other hand, can be filled with stretches of silence such as when the child still has food in his mouth or when you do not find the activity (like changing diapers) interesting to you or your child. Since the variety and amount of words you expose to your child directly influence his language development, it is no wonder that play time is an essential activity in a child’s daily life! [13]

With that said, however, not every play time is created equal. Some are more beneficial to your child than others. To introduce the Right Way To Play, we present to you the 3 T’s!
When we talk about play, we don’t mean planting an iPad in front of your child and running episodes of Sesame Street. Play time becomes significant to language development only when there is social interaction between the infant and his carers. Therefore, it is important for you to be physically present with your child as it is your responsiveness that will contribute to his language development.

Responsiveness refers to your ability to meet your child’s changing interests, respond to his attempts at communication and pay attention to him. [10] Such responsiveness obviously cannot be achieved by a cartoon on a computer screen as that form of communication is always one-way - from the screen to the child. The lack of responsiveness from electronic devices results in infants learning less vocabulary from them compared to when they play with traditional toys.

Furthermore, parents tend to interact less with their children when a technological device is used as they would rely on the device to facilitate play time. [16] Studies have shown that parents use less words, take less turns in talking, make fewer responses, and introduce less content words to their child when playing with electronic toys. [10] Think about it this way: Why would you want to talk to your child when there is another character on the screen ‘communicating’ to him at the same time? Therefore, it is important that the toys you choose require the sole interaction between you and your child for play time to occur.

Pro Tip!
Play with your child in a quiet environment where there is no background entertainment such as the television. It will reduce distraction and increase mother-child interaction! [4]
Here are some electronic toys and their traditional alternatives!

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Electronic</th>
<th>Traditional</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shape Blocks</td>
<td><img src="image1" alt="Electronic Shape Blocks" /></td>
<td><img src="image2" alt="Traditional Shape Blocks" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>Alphabet Books</td>
<td><img src="image3" alt="Electronic Alphabet Books" /></td>
<td><img src="image4" alt="Traditional Alphabet Books" /></td>
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<tr>
<td>Musical Instruments</td>
<td><img src="image5" alt="Electronic Musical Instruments" /></td>
<td><img src="image6" alt="Traditional Musical Instruments" /></td>
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</table>
THE 3 T’S - THEATRE

Mummy, it is time to put your drama hat on and be the actor you were always meant to be. Infants learn better when the same message is delivered to them through different techniques. For example, instead of merely telling a child that something is a square, you could point the square to the child at the same time. This form of communicative pointing will allow the child to pay better attention to the object as there is a visual and an aural cue directing him to it. These cues help the child to make a better connection between the object you are pointing at and the name you are mentioning, thus aiding in vocabulary learning. [3] In fact, when you gesture to your child during playtime, it is highly likely that your child will learn to gesture to you too. When your child does so, it is important for you to translate his communicative attempts into words as these words will enter his vocabulary. [7]

Another form of good gesturing is show gestures. [9] Held gestures require you to hold an object in front of your child while uttering the object’s name. On the other hand, show gestures require more movement by rotating the object or looming it in front of your child while uttering its name. Moving the object sustains your child’s attention for a longer time and at the most crucial point where he makes the connection between the moving object he sees and the name he hears.
The way you talk to your child differs from how you talk to your friends or colleagues. **Child-directed speech** (or Motherese) is often characterised by a higher pitch, more varied rhythm and longer pronunciation of vowel sounds. The variations in tone and pitch help your child in vocabulary learning as they attract his attention to what you are saying in a sea of other voices that are usually of a lower pitch and have less tone variations.

You should also speak to your child in complete sentences instead of omitting some grammar words (‘the’, ‘a’, etc.) to make them sound ‘simpler’ to him. Incomplete sentences like these are called **telegraphic speech** and they are detrimental to an infant’s language development. While grammar words may seem redundant to adults, infants learn new words better when they hear grammatically complete sentences as these function words contain information that help them process the language and understand the new word. [14]

A child also learns to form sentences based on the sentences he hears. [11] Therefore, child-directed speech should involve **variations sets** where you repeat the same message but in different ways so that your child will be exposed to many types of sentence formation. Repeating these sentences also helps your child to learn **segmentation** – the skill of dividing a flow of speech into individual words – which helps them in learning new words. [6]
When talking to your child, it is also important for your words to 'teach' or act as a scaffolding for him to perform a task. [5] Teaching can come in three forms: contingent response, cognitively stimulating language and autonomy-promoting language. It may all sound a little too technical now but let us break it down for you!

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Response Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Example</th>
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| Contingent Response                | Communication about objects or surroundings when your child is paying full attention to you | Look at your child when he is speaking
                                               Respond to your child's utterance |
| Cognitively Stimulating Language   | Language that uses wider vocabulary to make connections to what your child already knows | Describe objects and situations
                                               Ask questions
                                               Elaborate on solutions to the toy |
| Autonomy-Promoting Language       | Language that encourages your child to complete a task without your help     | “Try doing this yourself”
                                               “Now it's your turn” |

**Did You Know?**

There is a strong relationship between a child’s cognitive development (how he constructs his thoughts) and language development. [8] Therefore, playing games that require problem-solving skills will develop your child’s thought processes, and in turn, build his language capabilities. Shape puzzles are a good way to start!
TRY IT YOURSELF!
A baby rattle (below) is one of the most common play items you can find an infant holding. By referring to this item, grab a pen and complete the tasks on this page!

Variation Sets

Introduce the new word ‘rattle’ to your child in 4 different ways. e.g. Look at this rattle!
1. ____________________________________
2. ____________________________________
3. ____________________________________
4. ____________________________________

Cognitively Stimulating Language

Ask your child 2 questions about the toy. e.g. What colour is this part?
1. ____________________________________
2. ____________________________________

Describe 2 things about the toy to your child. e.g. This rattle is big.
1. ____________________________________
2. ____________________________________
REFERENCES


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