Introduction

A child learns from the people around him or her. As such, the role of the environment plays an extremely important role. During the early years of development where the family largely determines a child’s exposure, how can we then ensure that our children are placed in the most optimal language-learning environment?

As parents and caregivers, you want the best input for your child during the crucial early years of language development. Particularly in Singapore, most children grow up being speakers of at least two languages (Mother tongue, English, dialects, other foreign languages). Accordingly, the amount of learning that a child has to do to grasp two languages instead of one increases as well.

For a child who is learning language, it is very important for family members to act as a scaffold by providing “step-by-step” support when a child is learning. Some ways that this support can be given include providing...
task organization, guidance and feedback for the child [1]. For example, the use of repeated speech when talking to infants at 7 months old has been found to contribute to the development of a larger vocabulary at 20 months old [2]. Furthermore, as your child will have to eventually become an independent learner, the amount of support you provide should also gradually decrease as his language proficiency develops [3]. The influence of the family and how parents can facilitate healthy language development in young children is addressed below.

“How can parents influence language development?”

As parents, you have a significant role to play when it comes to influencing the language development of your child, especially during the early years of childhood where most of his interactions revolve around the family. Accordingly, it was found that 86% to 98% of children’s vocabulary (by the age of three years old) were also found in their parents’ vocabulary [4]. In other words, the children learnt from their parents and picked up what their parents knew. That being said, language learning is something that your child ultimately has to do for himself. However, there are several ways you can provide more support for your child:

**Ask Questions!**

Studies have shown that parents tend to contribute to narrative discussions more when their children are younger [5], and there may be a good reason for doing so. Children’s abilities to talk about events at preschool ages have been found to predict their language skills later on in life [6], and the development of this ability to narrate about happenings may also be facilitated by parents [7]. For example, parents who prompted their children with questions that made them think about the context of the situation (e.g. when and where something happened) helped in the development of narrative skills six months later [1]. Hence, try to ask your child questions when recounting about past
events that will make them think about the context (e.g. the “who, what, where, when, how” type of questions).

**Elaborate and Expand!**

Young children have been found to remember words better when the same words are presented repeatedly [8]. While repetition is good when it comes to teaching your child new words, it is advisable to expand on the vocabulary that they use as this can help them to learn the added words more effectively [9]. For example, when a child refers to a ball as “ball”, you can further expand your child’s vocabulary by saying “red ball”, or even “big red ball”.

Research has also found that children whose parents elaborate when talking about past experiences with them show benefits in terms of language development [10]. A study that was done on 275 families with children between 2 to 48 months also showed that 2-way conversations between parents and children more is associated with healthy language development in children [11]. As such, try to engage your child in more conversations about different topics that he can relate to, such as asking him what he likes the most about his favourite TV show, or about a family outing that he remembers.

**Praise Them!**

Another way that you can support your child’s language development would be to provide praise when he achieves something based on his own effort. Studies have found that parental praise can have positive effects on a children’s motivation, such as adopting the belief that effort brings success and that their abilities are in their own hands [12]. When you praise your child for something he has done, it can help him to learn that he is in control of the things around him and in turn build confidence in him that can motivate him to learn.

The amount of praise that parents give to their children is also related to the overall language environment that a child is in, which ultimately affects how well they learn language. A particular study which followed 42 families for two and a half years showed the importance of early experience in the family on language development [4]. The study found a 30-million-word disparity (number of words the child heard) between the number of utterances that children from families of higher and lower social economic statuses (SES) heard. Furthermore, it was found that high SES families provided 6 encouragements for every discouragement, whereas lower SES families provided 1 encouragement for every 2 discouragements. These results were also found to be related to the language outcomes of the children when they entered school. A particularly well-advocated strategy [13] that has been promoted in order to close this gap between different income groups is to: “Tune In” (i.e. by paying
more attention to what your child is saying), “Talk More” (use more descriptive words) as well as “Take Turns” (engage your child in conversation).

Therefore, the type and amount of words that you choose to say to your child matters, and it is recommended that you not only engage your child with questions, but also to elaborate and expand on the things that you say. Additionally, do build up their confidence and interest in learning by praising and encouraging them for even their smallest efforts.

“Do Siblings Affect Language Development?”

Aside from the influence that parents have on a young child’s language development, siblings also play an important role. Having more than one child not only allows for companionship (and perhaps some ruckus), it actually creates a language environment that is different from that of a single-child family. However, there is no straightforward answer to how having more than one child in the family affects language development as many things have to be considered.

Better communication

Firstly, there are advantages of simply having another sibling, such as learning how to communicate with others better. Two young children will not speak to each other the same way an adult would speak to a child. While adults may adjust their speech to match the level of a child, the older child may not do so with the younger child. As a result, young children often have to communicate and make sense of the things being said with lesser support [14]. Interestingly, this has
actually been shown to prepare children for communicating with their peers and other strangers as they grow older [15].

**Birth Order Differences**

Secondly, research has found that older siblings tend to have larger vocabularies than younger siblings, while younger siblings tend to have better conversational skills [16], [17]. While older siblings may know more words due to having a greater amount of exposure (e.g. they are older, parents had more time to focus on them alone), the conversational advantage that younger siblings have could be because of the different language environment that the younger child is exposed to. For example, the younger sibling may be exposed to more “mature and complex” conversations based on the interactions between the older sibling and parent, which is not something that the older siblings were exposed to [18].

**Richer Home Learning Environment**

Siblings can also teach each other language and literacy concepts, creating a richer home learning environment [19]. Not only are you never too old to learn, you are also never too young to teach. Studies have shown that language teaching between siblings work both ways, where younger siblings also have knowledge to offer their older siblings [20]. In particular, an older sibling’s awareness of the younger sibling’s learning capacity also helps to facilitate language development [21], where older siblings may also scaffold language learning of their younger siblings. As parents, you can help your older children to create a greater awareness for the language abilities of their younger siblings by getting them to put themselves in the shoes of their younger brother/sister, or to encourage them to take on the role of helping their siblings in language learning.
“What can we do as a family?”

Suggested activity: Tell Stories

A way that many parents can connect and interact with their children is through the reading of storybooks. Not only is this something children enjoy, it can also help them to develop their linguistics skills. While daily conversation is definitely useful in exposing your child to the language used, words that are used in storybooks tend to vary more than the words used in daily life [22]. This provide a richer context for children to learn a wider range of vocabulary. Correspondingly, studies have also shown that families that read more books with their infants tend to have infants who know more words [23].

How you engage in book-reading with your child is also key. When reading, it is beneficial to take on an interactive approach by prompting your child with questions and to get them to take part in discussions about the stories that are read [24]. Furthermore, you can read to your children together as a family and also use these stories as a means to create discussions between your children of different ages so as to allow siblings the opportunity to converse and teach one another, as well as for you as parents to elaborate on their utterances as well as provide your own input which will foster your child’s interest in reading as well as help him in developing his language skills.
References


