

# babbling babies

It may be cute and precious when your baby starts gurgling, but there's a basis for her drooly efforts. She is taking her first steps at learning about language, so babble right back at her! **ERNIZA JOHARI** investigates.

BABBLING, GURGLING, COOING - these sounds have long been associated with young babies. It's part of their development and parents have encouraged this for centuries, by "coochie-coo"ing right back, tickling under their chins to incite further giggles and seemingly meaningless sounds. But are they really all that nonsensical?

## The Proof's In The Babble

Recent research has shown that the baby-talk that we've long dismissed as random sucking or mouth movements does serve a purpose after all. Researchers from Dartmouth College in Hanover have proven that the first sounds that a young baby makes are her first real steps to establishing language.

In a test of 10 babies - ranging from 5 months to a year old - it was shown that babies attempt speech at a very early age. Lead researchers Laura Ann Petitto and Siobhan Holowka say language, even at the earliest stages, is under the direct control of the left brain hemisphere. Thus we speak primarily using the right side of the face more than the left.

This pattern was consistent with babies as well. The study showed that babies babbled mostly on the right side of the mouth (controlled by the left brain hemisphere) and smiled mostly on the left (perhaps due to the emotion-related right brain hemisphere).

Petitto and Holowka suggest that speaking to infants may help them to learn to speak, because hearing a variety of sounds tends to establish language on their own. So language-play, what we call baby-talk, may actually help children form words more quickly.



## In The Beginning

From the moment your baby wails at birth, she has begun her journey into the world of language. Ms Pika Sen, Speech Language Therapist from The Speech Pathology Centre explains: "Babies respond to the manner of sounds made at this age. They are calmed and soothed by a soft lilting rhythmic tone of voice; they're upset by loud, abrupt, gruff or harsh tones of voice. They tend to listen for human voices - if your baby is lying still when you start to speak, he will begin to move about animatedly and excitedly."

In her opinion, while babbling doesn't influence the age at which first words are said, Ms Pika Sen insists that it does help babies to practice all sorts of varied sound combinations. She adds, "It's also important for learning turn-taking in conversation." However, parents shouldn't panic if their baby isn't keen on babbling. "Some children don't say anything until they can say a reasonably recognisable word."

## Long Before The First Words

Before a baby utters her first "baba", researchers discovered, her mind is furiously sorting out the sounds and shapes of words and sentences. "Babies come equipped with basic speech perception capacities, as if it

same, whatever language you speak at home. "At about eight months," says Pika, "they're more interested in adult conversation even when it's not directed at them. She will watch a conversation between two adults quite intently and often they will interject with a loud shout or some sounds linked together that sound like a question!"

Babbling is useful for learning how to produce the sounds." During the first six months of life, physiological changes, such as the shape of oral cavity, tongue development, motor control of lips, and tooth eruption, also take place that contribute to speech development.

## Babbling – The Various Stages

From the age of four to six months, babies will start to babble, combining consonants and vowels (such as "baba" or "yaya"). She may say "mama" but she hasn't quite associated the word with you. This comes later, when she's almost a year old.

When she's two months old, she will respond to your monologue by smiling back and generally becoming excited, says Pika. "By about three months, they start to make some sounds of their own and will 'talk' back when 'talked' to." She continues: "Babies between three to six months often chatter away to themselves in what is commonly called baby-talk." She's experimenting with using her tongue, teeth, palate, and vocal chords. At this stage, babbling sounds the

same, whatever language you speak at home.

Between six to 12 months, she will sound as if she's making sense. Adeline Bong, a trader with an eight-month-old son, says: "He's beginning to finally sound like he's talking when he says 'mum-mum'. His speech patterns are so close to ours!"

Speech therapists say you can foster your baby's babbling by reading to her. Big, bright colorful books that appeal to all five senses are great for young babies, especially ones they can touch or mouth. Not only do books encourage language and communication but they also help to increase baby's attention span.

At 12–17 months, Baby is using one or more words and knows what they mean. She'll even practice inflection, raising her tone when asking a question, like "ted-dy?" for instance. She's realising the importance of talking, and how powerful it is to be able to communicate her needs.

five months, she may be watching your mouth intently and soon she'll start trying to talk back. You don't have to avoid complicated words as you speak to your baby, speech development experts say best way for her to expand her vocabulary is to hear you using new words.

One way to encourage language development is to answer as though you understand her when she 'talks' to you. According to "No More Baby Talk", "if he says 'ba-ba', answer with 'bottle'." Melanie Raj, mother of 11-month-old Natalie says this works for her: "Nat says 'ma-ma' a lot and I reply 'yes, I'm your Mama.' And she smiles and points back to me!"

You'll find that speaking to babies will come naturally the more often you do it. And don't feel silly babbling away wherever you are with your child, just remember to "use exaggerated facial expressions, direct eye contact, a singsong voice and short, simple phrases", as suggested by "No More Baby Talk". Before long, your child will be articulate enough to argue with you and you'll long for those babbling days again!



## You Can Help

An article on the Baby Center website ([www.babycenter.com](http://www.babycenter.com)) suggests simply talking to your child. Past research has shown that children whose parents spoke to them extensively had higher IQ's than those with more reticent parents. These vocally-gifted children also had richer vocabularies than those who didn't receive much verbal stimulation. Pika agrees: "Babies who are talked to a great deal are much more likely to be talkative than those who are handled in silence. This has implications for social interactions and learning experiences in the future."

In her book, "No More Baby Talk", she suggests several ways to maximise communication skills like: holding baby to face you, using a gentle and moderate voice during interactions and copying her when she coos. "Give him time to respond," according to Pika. "If he smiles at you, smile back...This turn taking is conversation, baby-style."

Talk to your baby for long stretches as you change, feed, or bathe her. At around



## Language Games For Baby

Here are some fun and simple games you can play with to encourage her speaking skills.

- Use puppets and have the puppet talk to your toddler. Let your child use the puppet to talk to you. Encourage a conversation between the puppet and your toddler.
- Use bath and bedtime routines as a way to talk to your toddler about body parts, clothing, books and saying goodnight to family members.
- Form a playgroup. If babies hear others using sounds to communicate, they might try to imitate them.
- Touch different parts of your baby's body and name them: "This is Brenda's foot. Where are Brenda's fingers?" Then touch parts of your own body, and do the same thing: "Here is Mummy's nose. Here is Brenda's nose." This game helps your baby learn about herself and her body, and understand the connection between words and objects.
- Copy her and make the exact sounds back to her. Smile and make the experience fun for your baby. She will figure out the "game" and repeat the sounds back to you. Once you have her attention, add a new sound to the game such as "la" and see if she is able to reproduce the new sound.