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PERSONAL HEALTH

## From Birth, Engage Your Child With Talk

By JANE E. BRODY

I recently stopped to congratulate a young mother pushing her toddler in a stroller. The woman had been talking to her barely verbal daughter all the way up the block, pointing out things they had passed, asking questions like "What color are those flowers?" and talking about what they would do when they got to the park.

This is a rare occurrence in my Brooklyn neighborhood, I told her. All too often, the mothers and nannies I see are tuned in to their cellphones, BlackBerrys and iPods, not their young children.

There were no such distractions when my husband and I, and most other parents of a certain age, spent time with our babies, toddlers and preschoolers. Like this young mother, we talked to them. We read to them and sang with them. And long before they became verbal, we mimicked their noises, letting them know they were communicating and we were listening and responding. (And we've done the same with our four grandsons, all born after the turn of this wireless century.)

I am not the only one alarmed by modern parental behavior. Randi Jacoby, a speech and language specialist in New York, recently told me in an e-mail message: "Parents have stopped having good communications with their young children, causing them to lose out on the eye contact, facial expression and overall feedback that is essential for early communication development.

"Young children require time and one-on-one feedback as they struggle to formulate utterances in order to build their language and cognitive skills. The most basic skills are not being taught by example, and society is falling prey to the quick response that our computer generation has become accustomed to.

"Parents need to be reminded of the significance of their communicative model."

### Communication Starts Early

Not all parents, of course, are routinely tuning out their young children. Two of my female friends in their 30s who have toddlers talk to them, and with them, incessantly.

One, a former Spanish teacher, speaks to her three little boys only in Spanish; her husband and almost everyone else in their lives speak to them in English. The oldest, now 3, is fluently bilingual and readily translates into English what has been said to him in Spanish. If I ask him something in Spanish, he responds to me in English (he quickly recognized my limits with Spanish) and even corrects my mispronunciations of Spanish words.

So much for the notion that learning two languages simultaneously delays a child's language development.

Ms. Jacoby's general advice to parents: "Reward your little one's communicative attempts with your heightened

attention to his/her conversation. Be prepared to put down your cellphone and look them squarely in the eye as they share their thoughts with you.”

Communication begins as soon as a baby is born. The way you touch, hold, look at and talk to babies help them learn your language, and the different ways babies cry help you learn their language — “I’m wet,” “I’m hungry,” “I’m tired,” “I hurt,” “I’m overwhelmed” and so forth.

“Talk to your baby whenever you have the chance,” the American Medical Association advises parents. “Even though he doesn’t understand what you’re saying, your calm, reassuring voice is what he needs to feel safe. Always respond to your newborn’s cries — he cannot be spoiled with too much attention.”

The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association urges parents to reinforce communication efforts by looking at the baby and imitating vocalizations, laughter and facial expressions.

“Talk while you are doing things,” the association suggests. “Talk about where you are going, what you will do once you get there, and who and what you’ll see.”

You might say things like, “Now we’re going to put on your socks,” “We’re going in the car to see Grandma,” or, “When we get to the playground, I’ll push you on the swing.”

And you can’t introduce books too early. I remember my niece at 3 months paying rapt attention as her mother “read” picture books to her, pointing out objects, their colors and what the characters were doing.

Likewise for the toddler. Advice from the speech experts: “Talk while doing things and going places. When taking a walk in the stroller, for example, point to familiar objects and say their names. Use simple but grammatical speech. Expand on words. For example, if your child says ‘car,’ you respond by saying: ‘You’re right! That is a big red car.’ ”

### **Not Verbal, but Understanding**

Keep in mind that preverbal children understand far more than they can say. One of my grandsons was a late-talker. When he wanted something to drink or eat, he went to the refrigerator or pantry and pointed. Our job was to ask, “Do you want water, milk or juice, cereal or raisins?” and wait for his response. When we guessed right, we reinforced the verbal message by saying, “Oh, you want cereal.”

Avoid “baby” words and baby talk, which can confuse a child who is learning to talk. Teach your child the correct words and names for people, things, places and body parts, including “breast,” “penis” and “vagina.” If your child uses a baby word (“din-din,” for example), you can repeat it but also use the correct one (“dinner”).

Play word games like “This Little Piggy” or “The Itsy-Bitsy Spider” and encourage your child to do the accompanying motions and perhaps some of the words.

Count the steps as you go up or down. My twin grandsons’ math skills flourished long before they could speak in sentences because they live in a third-floor walk-up. At whatever age your children start talking, let them know you are interested in what they are saying by repeating and expanding upon it and asking them to repeat what they said if at first you do not understand them.

Ask questions that require a choice, like “Do you want milk or juice?” or “Do you want to walk or ride in the stroller?” (An important aside: Too many city children are transported in strollers well beyond the time they can

safely walk and run. Young children need to exercise their bodies as well as their minds. The theft of our stroller when our twins were 19 months old was probably the best thing that happened to them.)

Help expand your child's vocabulary by talking about what is done with various objects or why a particular food helps to build healthy bodies.

Sing songs and recite nursery rhymes, and encourage your child to fill in the blanks. When reading a book together, which should be a daily activity, ask your child to name or describe the objects or talk about what the characters are doing.

Avoid verbal frustration. When your children try to talk to you, give them your full attention whenever possible. And before you speak to them, make sure you have their attention.