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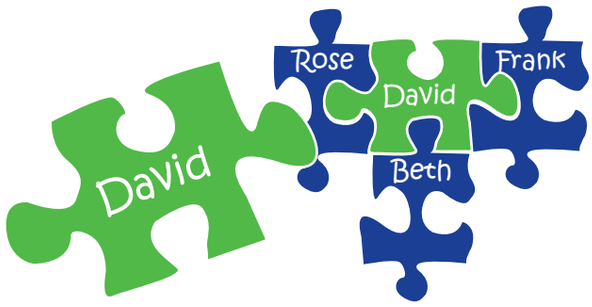
Language and Literacy



Introducing David: One child's journey toward language and literacy

Each child is different and each will learn to use language and to read in a slightly different way and at slightly different times. But most children – like David in our story below – follow a similar path.

0 to about 12 months

Right from birth, David naturally pays attention to sounds, especially the sounds of words. At two days old, he recognizes his mother's voice. Soon after, he learns that he can make sounds, too, and moves quickly from cooing ("aaaaeeee") to babbling ("dadadada"). By the time he is five months old, he can recognize more voices. Around 6 months, he enjoys games like peekaboo and will wriggle and make sounds to let his mother know that he wants to play the game again. At around nine months, he responds to "mama" and "papa" and "David." By about 11 months, he understands and responds to about 50 words.

About 12 to 24 months

At around 12 months David lets his mother know what he wants by pointing, making sounds and looking back and forth at her and at what he wants. He can also follow simple one-step directions such as "sit down," and starts to use single words, many with more than one meaning. For example, his favourite word is "ba," which he uses for both his ball and his bottle.

Over the next few months, David begins to use about 30 words consistently. (However, one friend at his child care centre has not started talking at all, while another uses about 10 words, and still another knows as many as 200 words.) At about 18 months, David also starts to put short, two-word sentences together – "mommy go," "daddy up." But it's clear he understands more words than he uses: if Beth, his child care practitioner, asks him to throw the ball, David will throw the ball. Between 18 and 24 months, he learns to point to his nose and his elbow when asked. Around 24 months, David knows how to use pronouns, such as "I," "you" and "he."

About two to three years old

David starts to pick up new words at an amazing rate – as many as 20 a week – although he's not quite sure how to use them all (he calls all dogs "Fido," not just his own). He often uses three-four word sentences and can tell his parents that "I read book" and "You go walk." Around age three, David knows and says about 700 words and begins to experiment with language. Sometimes he correctly uses the past tense ("David walked with Mommy"), and sometimes he adds an "s" or "ed" ending where it shouldn't be ("My tooths" or "I goed"). He can now follow two-step direction, such as "Please get your cup and put it on the table."

About four to six years old

When David starts kindergarten at age four, he can form many types of sentences properly, such as "I was eating an apple," "I was not eating an apple," "Did you eat my apple?" and "I was eating an apple and it was yummy." He also knows when he has more or less than his friend Hamid at the child care centre: "My apple is bigger than yours." When David looks at a book now, he recognizes that there are letters, words and sentences. He can write the letter "D" and is beginning to understand that it makes the /duh/ sound.

By the time he is five, David knows a few thousand words and will learn thousands more before he turns six. His sentences are mostly grammatically correct, and it is easy for his teachers, family and friends to understand him. He also understands opposites and difference: that he's a boy and his sister Maude is a girl; a bird flies and a fish swims. David has started making up his own stories to go with the pictures in the books his father reads with him – and his father says his stories are even better than the original!

What David's parents and child care practitioners did to help

David's development is the same as most children: he can associate letters with words and has the literacy skills he needs to begin reading at about age six. Some children, however, learn to read when they are four or five; others when they are seven or older.

One of the most important things David's parents and child care practitioners did in these early years was talk with him – using simple words, spoken clearly – from the time he was born. They also encouraged him to communicate with them, by

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giving him a chance to gesture or to speak, and responding with interest whenever he did. They also used a lot of touching, cuddling and non-verbal communication, encouraging David to sit on their laps and look at a book or object with them. This helped David to make a connection between language and the world around him and between reading and a warm and happy experience.

David's parents and his child care practitioners continued to talk with him as he grew, both one-on-one and in groups, and they made reading a daily activity. When he was ready, they encouraged David to hold the book himself, turn the pages and look at the pages from left to right. They also introduced him to the shapes and sounds of letters, words and numbers, and began to teach him to write letters and numbers as soon as he was interested in learning more.

Summary of Early Language and Literacy Milestones

Language and Literacy

There are many key language and literacy milestones ahead for David and his friends. All children are different, but the milestones below provide a general guide for their journey toward language and literacy.

Age	Stage
Newborn	‡ Startled by loud noise. ‡ Calmed by the sound of a familiar voice.
1 to 2 months	‡ Smiles when spoken to. ‡ Makes cooing sounds.
3 to 7 months	‡ Responds differently to different intonations (happy, angry). ‡ Babbles.
8 to 12 months	‡ Turns head toward sound. ‡ Pays attention when spoken to. ‡ Responds to name. ‡ Understands between five and 200 words (approximately). ‡ Recognizes phrases from games and routines, such as "peekaboo."
12 months	‡ Uses anywhere from zero to 30 words.
12 to 18 months	‡ Uses familiar words and phrases over and over again.
18 months	‡ Uses 10 to 250 words.
18 to 24 months	‡ Uses at least 10 words, but may use as many as 550 words. ‡ Understands one-step directions, such as "put the book on the shelf." ‡ Combines words into two-word sentences. ‡ Speaks intelligibly about two-thirds of the time. ‡ Uses at least two pronouns correctly, such as I, you, she, he, we, and they.
24 to 36 months	‡ Uses at least 50 words, but may use more than 700 words. ‡ Uses some plural forms of nouns. ‡ Uses some past tense forms of verbs. ‡ Knows and can point to main body parts when asked. ‡ Understands and responds to most simple questions. ‡ Takes part in brief conversations. ‡ Knows at least three prepositions (in, on, under).
3 to 4 years	‡ Names common objects in picture books or magazines. ‡ Uses sentences of three or more words, often with adult-like grammar. ‡ Asks who, where and why questions. ‡ Uses the past tense often. ‡ Tells a simple story. ‡ Follows simple directions easily, even when the target objects are not in visual range. ‡ Repeats words, phrases, syllables and sounds.
4 to 6 years	‡ Speaks in a way that is intelligible to adults who are not familiar with the child. ‡ Uses adult like grammar consistently. ‡ Uses fairly long sentences, with some compound and complex sentences – such as "My sister plays soccer and wears a uniform," or "When I get bigger, I can wear a uniform too." ‡ Knows common opposites: hard-soft, big-little. ‡ Counts to 10 and understands number concepts to 4 or more. ‡ Repeats sentences as long as nine words. ‡ Describes the use of common objects, such as a shoe, a hat or a table. ‡ Uses descriptive words spontaneously – for example, "This Play-Doh is soft." ‡ Makes up rhymes, including nonsense rhymes and chants. ‡ Tells a complete story with a beginning, middle and end. ‡ Predicts what happens next in a story.