

CHAPTER TWO

What is Language and How Does it Develop?

A recent survey by the ‘Hello’ campaign* found that 82 per cent of parents wanted more information on how children develop speech, language and communication skills. So, if you are one of the 82 per cent who want to understand more fully what’s going on in your baby’s brain during the crucial first four years of life, I will try to explain it to you, while keeping things as simple as I can.

WHAT IS LANGUAGE?

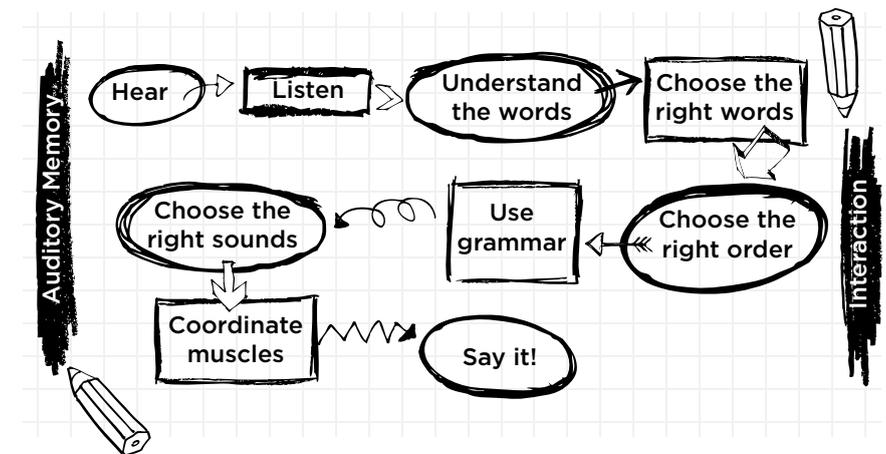
Speech, language and communication involve a variety of skills:

- attention and listening – how we focus and concentrate on the person talking in order to receive a message.
- comprehension – how we understand the language that we hear.

* The ‘Hello’ campaign was aimed at prioritizing children and young people’s communication in homes and schools, with special focus on those with speech, language and communication needs. It was run in the UK in 2011 by the Communication Trust in partnership with Jean Gross, Communication Champion for children, was sponsored by BT and Pearson Assessment and was backed by the Department of Health.

- expression – how we form words into sentences and use appropriate grammar to convey a message.
- speech/phonology – how we use sounds to make up a word.
- social skills and pragmatics – how we interact with someone in order to receive a message and use language appropriately to communicate, such as body language, eye contact, tone, volume, etc.
- memory – how we remember and store words and sentences in our brain.

The diagram below demonstrates this beautifully.

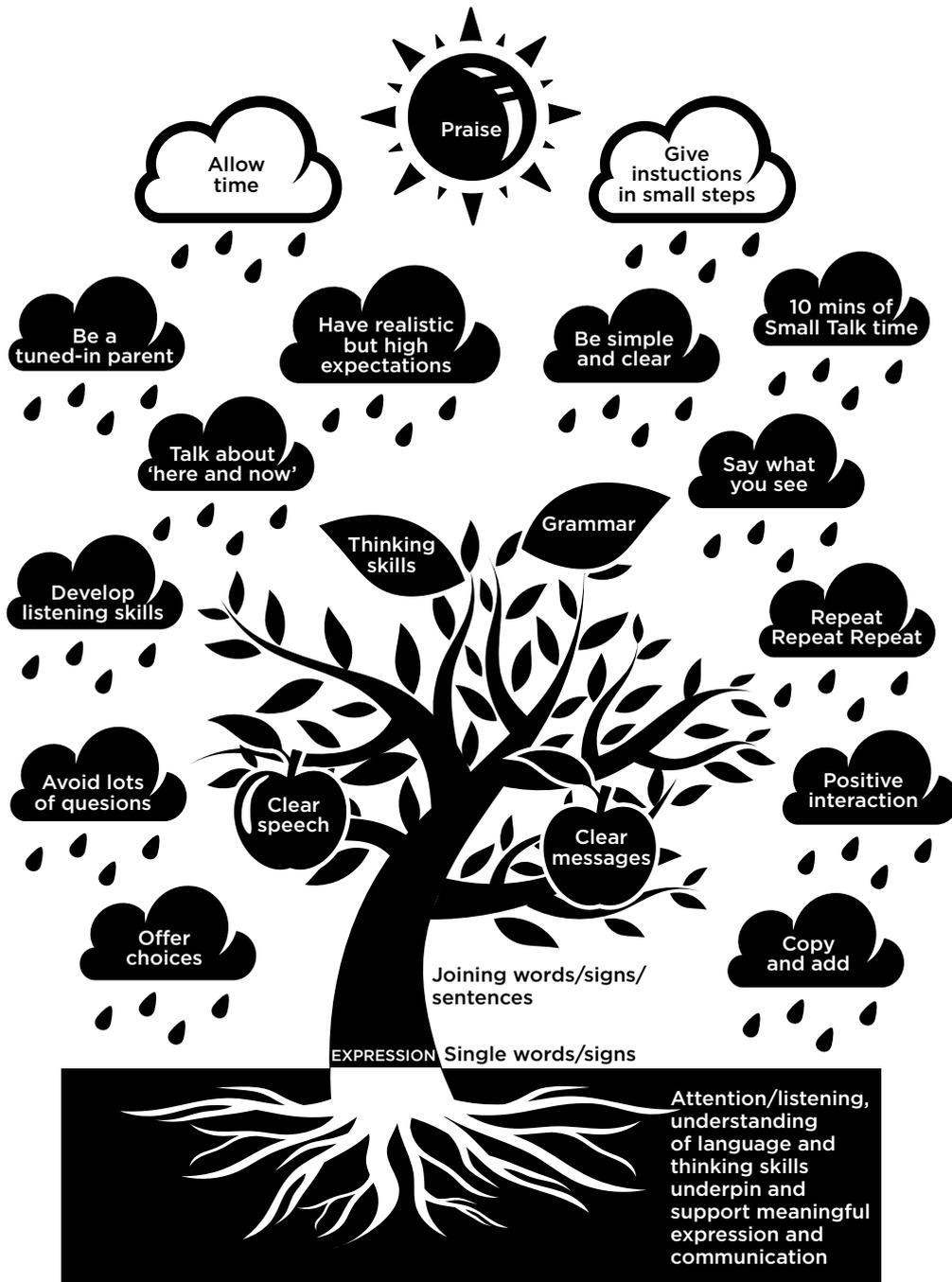


WHAT HAPPENS WHEN WE LISTEN AND SPEAK?

Based on a diagram designed by Anthea Williams and Jacqueline Woodcock

HOW DOES LANGUAGE DEVELOP?

It’s pretty amazing that children learn language. It is thought to be the most complex skill human beings develop and we still don’t understand it fully. Psychologists and linguists debate endlessly about what exactly enables a child to acquire language – is it nature or nurture? How is the brain wired in order to concentrate and to process language?



THE LANGUAGE TREE

can grasp the meaning intended when a foreigner speaks broken English). Without sunshine, the tree would not grow at all. In this diagram, sunshine represents parental input and praise, and the rain represents the things a parent can do to help the tree to grow. In no particular order, these are: create positive interactions; use single words and short sentences; allow time; give instructions in small steps; avoid lots of questions; offer choices; talk about the ‘here and now’; have realistic but high expectations; develop listening skills; repeat, repeat, repeat; follow your child’s lead; and use Say What You See (see page 17).

THE FIVE WAYS IN WHICH CHILDREN LEARN LANGUAGE

Research by Coupe, O’Kane and Goldbart in 1998¹ concluded that there are five fundamental principles of how children learn language²:

- A child needs a reason to communicate.
- A child begins to use language when she understands it is a better way to get what she wants.
- A child learns language through meaningful interactions with an adult who is providing both appropriate models and appropriate content. This is NOT a passive process.
- A child needs an adult to provide repetition and clarification in order for her to develop the ability to decode what is being said.
- A child needs to develop cognitive and social skills alongside language skills in order to continue developing language.

Now you can see the complexity of learning to speak, let’s go right back to the beginning – in the next chapter we’ll start with talking to your bump.

CHAPTER TEN

Common Parental Concerns

Whether I am seeing patients at my clinic, visiting families through my NHS work, or am off-duty on playdates with my daughter, mums and dads always seem to quiz me about the same issues. Parental hot topics, which often result in me getting a good grilling, are dealing with dummies, how to pick a nursery that promotes good communication, stammering, bilingualism, glue ear, how siblings can impact on speech and how to get the best out of a storybook.

So, in this chapter I'm sharing my expert advice on these testing topics with you . . .

DITCH THE DUMMY

The general rule is that, once a child starts attempting words at about 8 to 12 months, you should start to think about ditching the dummy. So, if your child reaches roughly 18 months and is showing signs of being hooked on her dummy, my advice would be to go the whole hog and take the dummy away completely rather than trying to reduce the number of hours the dummy is used, which is what some parents try at first. At my clinic we find that parents have a good success rate when they tell children to leave their dummy out on their birthday or at Christmas for the fairy or Santa, who will leave them a present in return. Another trick is to visit a young baby and persuade your

child to give the dummy to the little one, saying, 'You are so kind, well done, he needs it much more than you.' Every time she asks for it after that, you say again, 'What a kind girl you are, you gave it to baby Toby.'

Dentists agree that dummies have a significant impact on the development of children's teeth. When choosing a dummy, a dentist would suggest, aside from not having one at all, that you go for an orthodontic design, with a hole in the teat, which is supposedly better

CASE STUDY: FOUR-YEAR-OLD DUMMY USER WITH SPEECH PROBLEMS

When a child comes into the clinic I can see immediately by the shape of the mouth if the child uses a dummy. I recall one four-year-old boy who kept the front of his mouth completely still while talking - even his teeth were stunted in growth due to dummy interference. Parents tend to whip out the dummy as they walk into the health centre but I knew instantly what the problem was. To be technical, he was using the back of his mouth to talk, getting into a habit of saying 'k' and 'g' instead of 't' and 'd' ('t' and 'd' are tongue-tip sounds, while 'k' and 'g' are made using the back part of the tongue) and he had a lisp (see page 146). He would say 'key' instead of 'tea' and he would use the Welsh 'll' sound (as in 'Llanelli') instead of 's', so 'sausages' would be spoken as 'llaullagell'. He was beginning to be aware that he didn't sound like his friends and was getting frustrated. It was no surprise to the mother when I told her to ditch the dummy immediately and, within a couple of months, his speech was almost perfect. His mum explained that letting go of the dummy involved a couple of nights of crying but had been a lot easier than she ever expected.