



Media Release

Don't Worry, Talk Happy: Baby talk is good for your baby

Parents are often told that using “baby talk” will slow their child’s language development.

But research shows that babies prefer this type of verbal interaction to other types of speech, and it assists infant development in many ways.

Research has also shown that it is not just the use of simplified words like “tummy” and frequent repetition that makes it attractive to babies, but rather the *sounds* of baby talk, as it has a characteristic structure, rhythm and use of emotion.

Professor Denis Burnham said compared with usual adult-directed speech, infant-directed speech had more emotion, irrespective of the actual words used.

“Baby talk has a higher pitch and more up-and-down patterns, which attract infants’ attention,” he said.

“It also has more hyper-articulated vowels and consonants, which exaggerate the differences between sounds.

“This exaggeration helps language development. When mothers use more exaggerated vowels in baby talk their babies are better able to distinguish speech sounds.

“And exaggerated vowels help children acquire larger vocabularies.”

Professor Burnham said parents naturally adjusted how they communicated with their baby during their child’s first year to match their developmental level.

“And we continue to adjust how we speak to children as they become older and their language knowledge becomes more advanced,” he said.

“The developmental adjustments mothers make actually follow infants’ speech preferences across ages: more emotional at three months, approving at six months, and directive (“yes, look at the doggie”) at nine months.

“How mothers talk to their baby is automatically in synch with their baby’s preferences.”

Professor Burnham said parents need not worry about knowing when to stop using baby talk, or when to change how they speak, he said “your child’s behaviour will guide you.”

“This is not because parents are following some child development manual; mother and infant have a highly developed conversational dance, and under normal circumstances each responds to the nuances of the other’s speech.”

“However under certain circumstances, baby talk can differ from the norm.”

“For instance, baby talk by postnatally depressed mothers tends to have less exaggerated pitch intonation, and baby talk to hearing-impaired infants does not contain exaggerated vowels.”

For more information:

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