

T O P

Tips on parenting



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TOP is
published & produced by:
The Emma Eccles Jones Center
for Early Childhood Education at

Utah State
UNIVERSITY.

Yakking it up with Your Baby: Using Conversation to Build Richer Brains

by *Dr. Cheryl J. Rike*

All of us have wonderful dreams for our babies. As we look into that cradle, we imagine the newborn's life. We consider what this smart little one will be like in school. We picture her graduating from college and having a successful career. We see her with a family of her own—a great life. To that end, we do everything possible to ensure that dream comes true. Great nutrition, careful handling, sanitizing everything, and buying just the right educational toys are only the beginning. Many parents do everything they possibly can except actively and deliberately plan to nourish the unique brain growing inside that cute, little head. The truth is that simply talking to your babies may help them become better readers, communicators, and thinkers in the future. The following scenario shows how simple it is for parents to engage in enriching activities that are unplanned, yet in this case, very appropriate and effective.

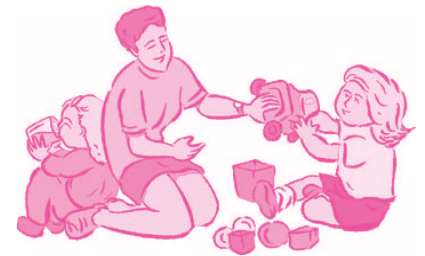
Not long ago as I was strolling through the aisles of a local home decorating store, I heard a mother in the other aisle say, "Haley, which do you think would look better in your room, the yellow one or the purple one?" Naturally, I thought she was addressing a three- or four-year-old. Imagine my shock, as I rounded the corner, to discover a two- or three-month-old in a carrier in the basket, gazing expectantly at her mother who was holding up two different artificial flower swags. As she smiled and waved her arms, it was obvious Haley was waiting to be addressed again—and loving every minute of this conversation.

The early childhood educator in me couldn't help but share with the mother what a wonderful job she was doing, through her conversation, helping Haley produce a richer, stronger brain. The mother simply said, "I wasn't aware I was doing all of that—she just always looks like she is so interested in what I say to her. Even though I know she doesn't understand what I'm saying, she seems to want to communicate. And, I love talking to her!"

Whether or not this young mother was aware of it, the fact is that language interactions with infants are critical. Through interactions with adults and siblings, children learn to model the patterns of conversation when their babbling and cooing is encouraged and reinforced. Infants need to be surrounded by the sounds of language accompanied by interactions to activities, such as nursery rhymes, chants, finger plays, and songs. Infants and toddlers who experience many interactions such as the one described above, in a warm, comforting environment strengthen and enrich the neural pathways dealing with language. Conversely, infants

"... talking to your babies may help them become better readers."

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Documenting Young Children's Accomplishments

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who are seldom talked to often miss opportunities to fully develop a broad array of language skills that encourage brain development.

Luckily infants quickly learn how to communicate. Soon after birth, they develop patterns of behaviors that allow them to send messages that make their needs and joys known, and to make us fall more in love with them every day. As they grow and mature, their speech and communication skills become refined as they are immersed in a language rich environment. Immersion seems a natural way to learn language. In fact, infants have the capacity to learn any language; but, because of the language reinforced by interacting with others, infants continue to discriminate speech sounds of their native language and prune those sounds which are not reinforced. Let's consider what an infant does as she begins to play with sounds and express herself while being immersed in the language rich environment. First the infant makes a sound, then the adult responds to and encourages (sometimes repeating) the sounds made by the baby, which is followed by the infant making more noise. This give and take continues until one of the participants gets interested in something else. In this manner, beginning communication occurs in a natural way that enhances what the infant is already doing.

This beginning natural conversation pattern is demonstrated by various early childhood theories of development. These social interactions become important strategies that help young children develop language. It is seldom that something so simple can reap such great benefits. A few suggestions to help parents grow richer, stronger brains in their infants and toddlers are:

- give infants and toddlers undivided attention—listen to them and talk to them, in person (sitting them in front of the television does not reap the desired benefits)
- consistently repeat what the child has uttered, using different tones of voice, inflections, and facial expressions
- attempt to add to the child's verbalization in order to complete the intent of conversation
- use active body language to enhance their understanding—babies are attracted to movement
- ask questions, pause, then supply the answer
- expose them to all types of language from prose to poetry
- remember infants and toddlers can develop richer brains if they hear sounds in other languages spoken—they won't become bi-

lingual, but they should have less trouble learning another language in the future.

Not only is language development crucial to strengthening neural pathways, evidence now supports the importance of oral language as a precursor to and an ongoing support for literacy development. Infants and toddlers should be read to as often as possible. They especially need to hear the sounds of 'book language' that differs in many ways from normal conversation. There are differences in intonation, pitch, stress, juncture, and syntax in books. Listening to the rich vocabulary, hearing the context the words are used in, and seeing the visual clues provided by colorful pictures help to enrich the child's repertoire and enhance brain and concept development. Just remember to choose sturdy cardboard books, washable cloth books, or plastic books since babies like to chew on them.

These simple activities can benefit your babies in ways too numerous to count. Consider every day we work with an infant or toddler as one that can never be repeated—it should be filled with fun, playful learning opportunities, and rewards for everyone. Yak it up! Simply talking to your babies can lay the foundations to make all the dreams for their futures come true. And, what could be easier—simply talk, talk, talk, and read, read, read! Grow those brains to be as rich and strong as possible simply through conversation.

~Dr. Cheryl J. Rike has been in education for over 30 years. She has been a teacher, a principal, and is currently a professor at the University of Memphis.

"Infants quickly learn how to communicate."





Tantrums, Fussing, and Whining from *The No-Cry Discipline Solution* (McGraw-Hill 2007)

by Dr. Elizabeth Pantley

If you ask parents to list the most frustrating discipline problems during early childhood, you would find that these three items appear on every list. All children master their own version of these behaviors – every parent has to deal with them!

Controlling their emotions

Most often these behaviors are caused by a child's inability to express or control his emotions. Tiredness, hunger, boredom, frustration, and other causes that ignite The Big Three can frequently be avoided or modified. When your child begins a meltdown, try to determine if you can tell what underlying issue is causing the problem. Solve that problem and you'll likely have your sweet child back again.

Handling tantrums, fussing and whining

No matter how diligent you are in recognizing trigger causes, your child will still have meltdown moments. Or even meltdown days. The following tips can help you handle those inevitable bumps in the road. Be flexible and practice those solutions that seem to bring the best results.

Offer choices

You may be able to avoid problems by giving your child more of a say in his life. You can do this by offering choices. Instead of saying, "Get ready for bed right now," which may provoke a tantrum, offer a choice, "What would you like to do first, put on your pajamas or brush your teeth?" Children who are busy deciding things are often happy.

Get eye-to-eye

When you make a request from a distance your child will likely ignore you. Noncompliance creates stress, which leads to fussing and tantrums – from both of you. Instead, get down to your child's level, look him in the eye and make clear, concise requests. This will catch his full attention.

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activity corner

Inspecting Worms

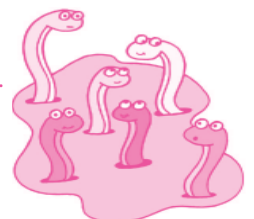
Worms are an important part of nature and preschool children find them fascinating. Like all living things, worms get rid of waste. This waste known as "castings" is a valuable food for plant roots. Children can learn about the importance of worms by closely examining a worm, watching how it moves, and feeling it wiggle in their hands.

Materials:

- Newspaper
- Construction paper
- Magnifying glass
- Spoons
- A worm for each child
- Moist soil in a large container
- A glass jar or clear plastic container

Procedure:

This activity can be done inside or outside. Lay newspaper out on a flat surface (e.g., table, floor, sidewalk, ground). Empty a bag of moist soil into a large container. Give each child a spoon and a medium size glass jar or clear plastic container. Ask the children to scoop the moist soil into the jar or container so it almost reaches the top. Hand out a piece of dark construction paper and a magnifying glass to each child. Take out one of the worms and show the children how to gently pick up and hold a worm in your hand. Say to the children, "I don't want to hurt the worm. I will hold the worm very gently in my hand. I won't pinch the worm. I want to keep him safe." This will teach children how to respect a living creature. Tell the children that you will be putting a worm on top of their construction paper. Ask the children to closely observe the worm with their eyes and the magnifying glass. The children will see little rings on the worm. These are the worms muscles that help the worm plow through the soil. Tell the children to gently turn the worm over so that they can see the worm's tiny feet on its underside. Keep in mind that a few preschool children would rather not touch worms. These children may feel more comfortable if you give them a pair of gloves. They can also locate the worms "eye" used for sensing and finding its way underground. Once the children are done examining the worm, they can put the worm in their soil filled glass jar or clear plastic container. They will be delighted to watch the worm plow its way through the soil. Remember not to keep the worm in the open air for longer than a couple minutes. Worms need dark, moist soil to survive. When you are done exploring the properties of the worm, you can demonstrate kindness to the children by returning the worms to the moist soil outside.





Tantrums, Fussing, and Whining

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Tell him what you DO want

Instead of focusing on misbehavior and what you don't want him to do, explain exactly what you'd like your child to do or say instead. Give him simple instructions to follow.

Validate his feelings

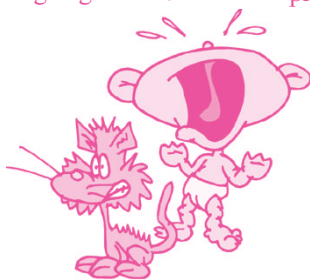
Help your child identify and understand her emotions. Give words to her feelings, "You're sad. You want to stay here and play. I know." This doesn't mean you must give in to her request, but letting her know that you understand her problem may be enough to help her calm down.

Teach the Quiet Bunny

When children get worked up, their physiological symptoms keep them in an agitated state. You can teach your child how to relax and then use this approach when fussing begins.

You can start each morning or end each day with a brief relaxation session. Have your child sit or lie comfortably with eyes closed. Tell a story that he's a quiet bunny. Name body parts (feet, legs, tummy, etc.) and have your child wiggle it, and then relax it.

Once your child is familiar with this process you can call upon it at times when he is agitated. Crouch down to your child's level, put your hands on his shoulders, look him in the eye and say, let's do our Quiet Bunny. And then talk him through the process. Over time, just mentioning it and asking him to close his eyes will bring relaxation.



Distract and involve

Children can easily be distracted when a new activity is suggested. If your child is whining or fussing try viewing it as an "activity" that your child is engaged in. Since children aren't very good multi-taskers you might be able to end the unpleasant activity with the recommendation of something different to do.

Invoke his imagination

If a child is upset about something, it can help to vocalize his fantasy of what he wishes would happen: "I bet you wish we could buy every single toy in this store." This can become a fun game.

Use the preventive approach

Review desired behavior prior to leaving the house, or when entering a public building, or before you begin a playdate. This might prevent the whining or tantrum from even beginning. Put your comments in the positive (tell what you want, not what you don't want) and be specific.

When it's over, it's over

After an episode of misbehavior is finished you can let it go and move on. Don't feel you must teach a lesson by withholding your approval, love or company. Children bounce right back, and it is okay for you to bounce right back, too.

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Using Beautiful Stuff to Promote Critical and Creative Thinking

by Dr. Michelle Fazio-Brunson

If I had to pick two questions parents most often ask, the first would be, “What are some activities I can do at home to help my child in school?” and “Which learning toys do you recommend?” My answer to both questions is beautiful stuff (Topal & Gandini, 1999). Beautiful stuff, also referred to as loose parts by some (Curtis & Carter, 1996), is the stuff adults often throw in the trash when its use is no longer valued. Examples include fabric remnants, broken jewelry, wallpaper scraps, ribbon ends, bottle caps, marker caps, pieces of wood, etc. These items often hold not only an aesthetic appeal to young children, but they also spark ideas for new uses. Fabric remnants might become a new outfit for a doll, wallpaper scraps can become a rug for a dollhouse, wood pieces can be arranged into a sculpture, and a variety of these materials can be combined into an intricate collage. Two advantages of using beautiful stuff with young children are that they teach children to reuse materials, and there is no cost for parents. Listed below are some strategies you can use to increase your child’s critical and creative thinking skills through working with beautiful stuff.

Gathering Beautiful Stuff

First, help your child collect beautiful stuff into a basket or clear container. My favorite place to begin is the kitchen junk drawer, since almost every household has one. Are there keys you’ve long since forgotten what they fit? Do you have extra nuts, bolts, and screws? Look for items of various colors, shapes, sizes, and textures. Next, consider other places in your home that might be beautiful stuff havens: bedrooms, closets, craft rooms, sewing baskets, and storage areas. Let your child decide when he or she has enough materials to begin.

Exploring Beautiful Stuff

Take time to explore the beautiful stuff with your child either on the floor or at a table. Let your child touch each piece and say whatever comes to mind. Do not make it a sequential question-answer activity, but feel free to ask some open-ended questions that facilitate creative and critical thinking, such as:

- What do you think this is? Why?
- Where do you think this item came from? Why do you think that?

- How would you describe this object?
- How would you describe its texture? Shape? Color?

After your child has had ample time to explore the beautiful stuff, you can move into sorting the materials.

Sorting Beautiful Stuff

Extend your experience of exploring the beautiful stuff by helping your child sort it. Gather several baskets, bowls, or clear containers that you and your child can use to sort the materials, and spread the materials out. Listed below are some open-ended questions you can ask to facilitate creative and critical thinking at this stage:

- Can you pick a few of your favorite materials out for me?
- Why are they your favorites?
- Can you tell me some ways that these things are alike? Good! Let’s put these together.
- Can you find some other items that are like these items?

In the beginning, your child will likely sort by only one attribute. For example, if your child wants to sort by color, he or she would place all the green materials together and all the yellow materials together. Your child might also want to sort by texture. In this scenario, items with a rough texture such as sandpaper might be placed together, and smooth materials such as ribbons would be grouped in a second category. Materials can also be sorted by composition: items made from wood would be grouped in one pile, and items made from plastic would be placed in a second group. With practice, your child will progress into sorting the beautiful stuff by more than one attribute (e.g., blue ribbons would be grouped separately from red items made from wood). Encourage your child to think of a variety of ways to sort the materials before moving on to construct with the materials.

Constructing with Beautiful Stuff

The exploring and sorting processes lead in to helping children understand how to work with beautiful stuff in constructing experiences. Your child will begin to understand that if he or she wants to join two pieces of paper, clear tape or a glue stick could be used. To adhere two pieces of wood, he or she might want to use wood glue. Other tools your child can explore to join materials include staplers, paste, brads, and a variety of types of tape.

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Using Beautiful Stuff to Promote Critical and Creative Thinking

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The constructing process can involve you and your child in creating an open-ended art product that utilizes his or her artistic expression. Your child might simply want to create a collage with the materials, or he or she might want to utilize other art media such as paint, watercolor, crayons, or chalk to embellish a piece that is constructed from beautiful stuff. Remember that your role in this experience is that of facilitator.

You do not want to tell your child exactly what to do and how to do it since he or she is completely capable of designing the piece. Rather, you should offer simple, specific praise as appropriate, such as:

- * You used several shades of blue in your construction.
- * You spent a lot of time deciding where to put your yellow ribbon.
- * You were very patient when you were learning how to use the glue.

If your child gets stuck, you might ask questions along these lines:

- * What do you think would happen if you _____?
- * Which materials could you use to make your _____?

Your child is completely capable of problem-solving, and you can facilitate this process by maintaining a nurturing, caring environment during the experience.

Not only can constructions be open-ended, but your child may also use this process to document something he or she knows or is learning about. For example, if your child has developed an interest in bugs, you might observe bugs on a nature walk and then read books and visit websites to investigate the bugs in order to learn more about them. When your child has a working knowledge about the topic, he or she could then use beautiful stuff to construct something that documents the knowledge, such as a single bug or a bug habitat. You can assess what your child knows about the topic by examining the construction. For example, if your child constructs an ant from beautiful stuff, you would expect to find two antennae, a body that is divided into three sections, six legs, etc.

When you and your child are ready to tuck the beautiful stuff away, be certain to place it out of reach in a childproof container if you have young children or visitors who might find the beautiful stuff intriguing.

Conclusion

You can utilize beautiful stuff to create experiences with your children to achieve a variety of outcomes. Such experiences facilitate creative and critical thinking as children learn how to join materials in an aesthetically pleasing way, and they learn

how to reuse materials and to find new uses for materials, which is good for the environment. Finally, children can use these experiences to document their knowledge of a particular topic, bridging the home and school environments, and spending time with you, your child's most important teacher.

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~Dr. Michelle Fazio-Brunson directs the Graduate Programs in Early Childhood Education in the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences at Northwestern State University.





question corner

“What can I do when my children are constantly fighting with each other over toys, food, space, and my attention?”

— Ginger in Washington

Sibling rivalry occurs when brothers and sisters become territorial and competitive for their parents love and attention. Young children do not know that parents have enough love to go around to everyone in the family. They often think the attention parents give to a new baby takes away the love the parents have for them. When they do fight, take a deep breath and do not constantly play referee. Teach the children how to communicate with each other. Unless the children are physically or emotionally harming one another, it is best to let siblings work things out for themselves. Sometimes it's best just to walk away. Children fight more in front of their parents than when they are alone. However, be sure to always intervene if the children are physically harming, demeaning, or humiliating each other. If this occurs, give your attention to the victim first, not the aggressor. Listen to both sides of the story and don't play favorites. If you don't know who the aggressor was, be clear that the consequences are for all the children. Teach children not to respond to their sibling's name calling or teasing. Teach them the steps for resolving conflicts and negotiating solutions, but then step away and let them solve their own problems. Avoid comparing the children. Allow them to be individuals and blossom with their own personalities. Do not expect the siblings to be best friends or even like to do the same things. Most importantly, schedule and spend private time with each child so they are assured that you do love them.



Reference: *A to Z Guide to Your Child's Behavior: A Parent's Easy and Authoritative Reference to Hundreds of Everyday Problems and Concerns from Birth to 12 Years*. Compiled by the faculty of the Children's National Medical Center under the direction of David Mrazek, M.D. and William Garrison, Ph.D., with Laura Elliot.

~Heidi Malloy, Ph.D., is an associate professor in the Department of Psychology at Metropolitan State University.

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tips on parenting

TOP: tips on parenting

is published quarterly by the Emma Eccles Jones Center for Early Childhood Education at Utah State University.

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