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CONTRARY to common belief, newborn infants are not as helpless as we think.

From the moment of birth, babies are exposed to a wide variety of sounds and learn to distinguish sounds from other noises around them as being the sounds of speech.

Indeed, research monitoring babies in the womb has shown that even they respond with limb movements or changes in foetal heart rate, for example, to a range of sounds, including the human voice and different speech sound.

In addition to the ability to perceive speech segments, the child must also develop the ability to recognise such aspects as intonation etc.

Babies link and form relationships between particular intonation patterns and particular facial expressions of speakers. So communication between caregivers and babies is vital for acquiring language.

During its first year, a child produces a range of vocal sounds but it is only towards the end of the first year that speech sounds begin to be used linguistically to signal meaning.

As babies make this progression, it is important to remember that their vocal organs are very different in size and shape from adult vocal apparatus as babies have significantly less space in their mouths than adults.

Infants progress from producing sounds that are largely related to basic biological states and functions (crying when hungry) to the "vocal play" stage when they begin to experiment with their newly discovered sound-making apparatus.

During this stage, there may be a lot of day-to-day variations in the baby's sound productions, with a particular sound occurring frequently for a day or two and then disappearing to be replaced by what seems to be a new favourite sound.

With the distinct emergence of "babbling", the baby starts producing stretches of sound which appears to be much closer to adult speech.

Once children begin their first words stage, their attempts at producing words will, for some time, result in what we hear as mispronunciations of the adult forms.

During this time, the child is formulating a theory about the nature of his native sound system, testing these against his own speech perceptions and productions, thus consistently revising his ideas so that his sound system gradually comes to match that of



Sound out their world

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his adult native speaker.

Language is the ship that sails between us, so when children utter words and speak in sentences, they introduce us to their minds.

At first, words are produced one at a time, as early as 10 months for some children.

By 18 months of age on average, a child has accumulated 50 words, and from here their vocabulary usually grows at a fiery pace.

Between the ages of two and six, children learn the meaning of approximately eight new words a day on average. By the time they enter school, children have a mind-boggling 11,000 or so words! Children master "word order" before they master grammar — for example "I goed", "Aiman sleepy" and they often use nouns before verbs. Nevertheless, the child is creating sentences and adults know what the child means.

Formation of sentences appears between the ages of two and four with grammatical competence developing next.

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First, the understanding of "ing" endings. "I singing", then prepositions "in" and "on". "I sitting on Ayah".

Possessives and plurals come next, "Cats is sitting on Mummy's chair".

Following this, the articles "a" and "the" are learnt followed by the "tenses".

With the exception of irregular verbs (drink/drank. Fly/flew), a child is fairly fluid in language by the age of four.

When speaking, children may be using "language instinct", especially when the sentence used is "I runned" for "I ran", or "I hitted" for "I hit".

However, these seeming "errors" demonstrate that children are aware of the rules of language they are acquiring.

The importance of adult-child conversation should never be underrated because words are acquired if words are heard.

A child in a silent world will be unable to acquire language. This is because adult patterns of speech are reflected in speech patterns in

children.

Thus, children from Kuala Lumpur, Negri Sembilan, Johor and Kedah may be speaking English or Bahasa Malaysia but the sounds of the words spoken and expressions used will reflect the intonation of conversation heard.

The mistaken idea of over-exposing young children to television will not advance them linguistically as would social interaction and conversation with adults.

In the final analysis, a child's linguistic progress relies heavily on shared adult-child conversation. Just as a child born into silence will live a life of silence, a child surrounded by nurturing language will attain linguistic success.

So, go ahead — enjoy a meaningful conversation with your child today.

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