

# Language Development and Television

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## What's special about television time?

At first glance, it may seem odd to suggest that your child's language can be developed while watching TV. Some experts say television can't contribute to learning because children aren't actively involved in it. But with a few changes in the way you watch TV, this everyday family time can be transformed into a dynamic language experience.

Television provides a great opportunity for your child to see unfamiliar people, places, and things. The outside world suddenly comes into your home! Take advantage of this by making these people, places, and events the topics of conversation. Point out the unique features of what you are watching. Or, when the shows are about familiar situations, highlight the similarity between what occurs on screen and what takes place in your child's daily life.

Some of your child's earliest experiences with humor may involve situations shown on television. Children are delighted to see funny characters, or ordinary people doing silly things. Many times, the child's sense of humor develops as a result of parents and their child laughing at a TV event together, then discussing what was funny and why. Television can also influence your child's sense of right and wrong. Your child observes people relating to one another and solving problems. This, in turn, can contribute to how your child thinks and talks about people and situations. Through discussion, you can positively shape your child's growing sense of values.

## Transforming TV Time into Talk Time

Transforming TV time into talk-time requires imagination. One suggestion is to sometimes turn down the sound and describe action sequences. Another possibility is to use the commercial breaks as a time to talk about previous scenes or to predict upcoming events. The point is that you can promote conversation by eliminating the sound and setting the stage for discussion. When your child will be watching alone, you may wish to focus attention by saying "Watch and listen carefully!" Later, you can ask questions about what your child saw and heard, encouraging the child to remember and relate details. This suggestion is most useful when the TV dialogue is geared to a child's interest and language level (Mr. Rogers, Sesame Street).

## "TV Talk" Activities

You can use the following activities with your child before, during, or after watching a television program.

1. Give background information.
  - Review previous episodes of continuing stories.
  - Before viewing a program, discuss the main events and characters that will be seen.
  - Talk about characters and settings (objects, places, time periods) while watching the show.

2. Focus attention.
  - Alert you child to watch for particular details, including action, sound effects, and visual images.
  - Ask you child to listen carefully and remember as much as possible. After the show, ask your child to retell the story.
  - Ask your child to talk about what is happening on the screen.
  
3. Relate TV information to the real world.
  - Have your child identify objects on TV that are the same as those at home.
  - Tie in events on TV to your child’s school and home routine.
  - Highlight TV events that are similar to family experiences and trips.
  - Compare TV characters and settings to people and places the child knows.
  - Talk about commercials and discuss the uses of the products advertised.
  
4. Interpret events.
  - Explain the actions and behavior of people and animals.
  - Separate reality from TV fantasy. (Would that really happen? Is there such a thing?)
  
5. Predict events.
  - Ask what might happen in the upcoming show and encourage the child to guess what comes next.
  - Ask the child to predict what would happen in similar real-life situations.
  
6. Discover humor.
  - Talk about the events that make you and your child laugh.
  - Talk about what makes a scene funny.
  - Point out how double meanings create humor (puns, idioms).
  
7. Discover feelings.
  - Describe how you felt after watching a particular scene. Ask how your child felt about it.
  - Ask your child what characters on television are feeling.
  - Point out how music sets an emotional mood.
  
8. Shape Values.
  - Identify good and bad traits of characters (real and cartoon). Compare these characters to people your child knows.
  - Ask your child what would happen if the child met similar characters in real life.
  - Encourage your child to express opinions and preferences. Then share your own viewpoint. Ask what shows and characters are your child’s favorites and why.
  - When a particular show is inappropriate for your child to watch, explain the reasons for your decision.

Using these activities, you can make TV time an important learning experience for your child.

#### Vocabulary

*Concept* – A general idea or characteristic applicable to several objects or events, which helps organize knowledge about the world.

*Model* – To provide an example of good speech or other behavior; to demonstrate a desired verbal response.

*Speech and language clinician* – A person who is qualified to diagnose and treat speech, language, and voice disorders.

## Talking Tips for Parents

Use these suggestions during everyday activities to encourage your language development:

1. Keep talking fun.
2. Reward and praise your child's communication attempts. It's not necessary to correct your child's grammar or pronunciation.
3. Use facial expressions and gestures to help your child understand.
4. Keep your sentences short and simple.
5. Speak slowly and clearly. Repeat for your child if necessary.
6. Emphasize key words you want your child to learn.
7. Repeat main ideas frequently, in as many different ways as possible.
8. Set a good example for your child. **Model** correct speech. It's not necessary to ask your child to repeat exactly what you say.
9. Give your child enough time to respond. Your child may take a long time to organize thoughts and feelings and put them into words. Avoid the tendency to interrupt your child.
10. Discuss your child's language abilities with your **speech and language clinician**. Try not to expect too much – or too little – of your child.
11. Avoid placing too much pressure on your child to talk. Your child may not want to "perform" verbally in front of others.