

# THE PARENT LETTER



About Our Kids:  
A Letter for Parents by the  
NYU Child Study Center

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## LANGUAGE ABILITIES AND THE IMPACT OF LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES

### **When does language start?**

Think of your child when he/she was an infant and recall the way that he cooed, warbled and gurgled, even before he said his first word. Your child was practicing for later communication but neither her brain nor her vocal apparatus were developed enough for her to use words to communicate her needs. As children grow, however, they came to recognize that sets of particular sounds, when organized in a certain way, have meaning. Children also gradually learn that words go together in many different ways and that they can communicate their ideas to other people. These language abilities develop automatically for most children because they regularly listen to and talk with members of their families.

Indeed, studies have shown that talking to young children is important, and that families differ in how much they talk to their infants. Even before children turn 12-15 months old (a milestone around which most children will utter their first words), parents may have exposed them to thousands of new words and millions of words may have been spoken in their presence. Studies of how families communicate before the age of 18 months show that children whose parents talked to them a lot had stronger skills when they began school than children whose parents had spoken to them less. For the average child, the best foundation for academic success is increased exposure to language.

### **What are the basic building blocks of language?**

By the age of four or five, children typically have the ability to name many objects, understand straightforward communications, follow two and three step instructions, and listen to and comprehend short stories. These skills are called *receptive language* abilities because they involve the understanding of information spoken by others. Most children at that age also have the capacity to repeat information told to them and to express their ideas according to specific rules, called syntax, which is equivalent to the rules of grammar. These are called *expressive language* skills. As children develop, they demonstrate greater abilities to listen to and understand lengthier communications, they can remember and retain more verbal information, and they also add skills involved in understanding figurative communications and pragmatic language rules, like turn taking in dialogues and the methods of practical and social language use.

### **How much learning is based on these language skills?**

Many aspects of school instruction involve language skills. For example, a teacher may deliver a brief lecture as a form of teaching and classroom discussions often serve as an opportunity to learn new information. Children are also expected to remember what was said to them for later use. Children with receptive and/or expressive language difficulties will likely struggle in school because they cannot easily learn in these conditions. These children cannot always keep up with the pace of verbal instruction, they may not consistently understand the content of ideas being discussed, and they may not have strong skills for communicating what they do or do not know. As a result, they may become withdrawn in school or appear inattentive because they lose their focus when they do not understand what is being discussed. For these children, language skills need to be evaluated and, when necessary, speech and language therapy should be instituted. As language skills improve, they feel more productive in the classroom.

## **How do language abilities influence a child's performance in reading, math, and writing?**

Some language skills play a significant role in academic development. Young children should be able to rhyme, to understand that letters stand for specific sounds, and to detect individual speech sounds, called phonemes in words. They can then recognize and manipulate speech sounds. This skill, which is the foundation of learning to read, has been labeled '*phonological awareness*' or '*phonological decoding*.' As an example, when a child learns to read he must sound out each letter before he recognizes the word. Children with difficulties in phonological awareness will not consistently recognize the sounds associated with each letter and will struggle to learn to read fluently. Research studies have shown that these problems in phonological decoding are evident in almost all cases of developmental dyslexia or reading disorder. Difficulties manipulating speech sounds for the purposes of reading and writing are called 'language-based', but they are not the same difficulties as seen in children with receptive and expressive language difficulties; as dyslexic children often understand other people's oral communication and verbally express their ideas with ease.

## **What can be done to help children with language-based learning difficulties?**

If you suspect your child has a learning disability, a psychoeducational evaluation is recommended in order to identify the cause and severity of his or her difficulties. The Committee for Special Education through the Board of Education in your school district can complete these assessments or a local psychologist may be able to evaluate your child for the presence of these problems. These difficulties do not resolve by themselves as your child grows older, so if a disorder is diagnosed, specialized interventions are necessary. Early intervention is crucial so that the child does not fall further and further behind her peers.

## **What is the emotional impact of language difficulties or learning disorders?**

Children who are diagnosed with a language-based learning disability or a language disorder can feel demoralized and defeated by their struggles. Many children with these difficulties become aware that they are not performing as well as other children and they may withdraw or avoid academic challenges. Helping these children overcome these weaknesses is imperative so that they can experience more success when approaching academic challenges.

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## **ABOUT THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER**

The NYU Child Study Center is dedicated to the research, prevention and treatment of child and adolescent mental health problems. The Center offers evaluation and treatment for children and teenagers with anxiety, depression, learning or attention difficulties, neuropsychiatric problems, and trauma and stress related symptoms.

We offer a limited number of clinical studies at no cost for specific disorders and age groups. To see if your child would be appropriate for one of these studies, please call (212) 263-8916.

The NYU Child Study Center also offers workshops and lectures for parents, educators and mental health professionals on a variety of mental health and parenting topics. The Family Education Series consists of 13 informative workshops focused on child behavioral and attentional difficulties. To learn more or to request a speaker, please call (212) 263-8861.

For further information, guidelines and practical suggestions on child mental health and parenting issues, please visit the NYU Child Study Center's website, [AboutOurKids.org](http://AboutOurKids.org).

**AboutOurKids.org**

THE NYU CHILD STUDY CENTER ONLINE

**Changing the Face of Child Mental Health**  
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