



Best Practices

Older infants are on the move—and curious. They want to know what everything is, where it fits, and how it works. They are also exploring how they fit—into different kinds of spaces and also how they fit into their social world. As with younger infants, they depend upon the reassurance of loved and trusted adults for the security that allows them to reach out and learn. Now, however, these adults provide a secure base from which older infants can set out and explore on their own.

Most older infants understand some language and are rapidly learning more. They communicate with increasingly expressive sounds and actions and may also use gestures, signs, and even a few words. As children make new discoveries and connections, language becomes an even greater support for learning. As with younger infants, back-and-forth “conversation” helps build relationships and language, but older infants are now trying to understand and communicate intentional messages.

Expand Language—All the Time

The more language older babies hear, the more their language will develop. But *overhearing* doesn't count—babies don't learn language by listening to adults talk or by watching TV or videos. When an educator engages a baby in back-and-forth conversation and connects the conversation to an activity or discovery, he helps the baby's language develop faster and more fully. Play times, feeding and changing times, and passing encounters provide opportunities to expand babies' *receptive* (understood) language and their *expressive* (spoken or signed) communications.

- **Converse back and forth while playing together.** Responsive communication is key for older babies, who are associating words (and signs) with meanings. Give the baby a chance to respond to words—with words, sounds, actions, or imitation.
- **Keep the exchange going.** Respond to the baby in ways that acknowledge the baby's intent—by copying or extending her sounds, putting words to what she might be saying, answering her implied question, or sharing something new.
- **Pay joint attention.** During the older infancy period, babies develop the ability to follow a caregiver's gaze or direct his attention by pointing to, making sounds, or showing what

they want. An educator and baby's *joint attention*, or shared focus on an object, helps the baby learn new words because she knows what the word refers to.

- **Pair words with gestures or signs to make meaning clear.** Research has found that talking with your hands speeds and supports language development. Older infants and young toddlers develop stronger language when their families and caregivers pair their words with gestures and signs.

How do educators and babies show each other that they are connected?

- Here are some of the ways educators and babies convey their connection to each other:
 - Educators smile, pay close attention, reflect the child's emotions in their words and tone of voice, refer to past shared experience (for example, in the video a child chooses a story for Eileen to tell and she responds, "I knew you were going to pick that one"), and continue the conversation.
 - Babies pay close attention; show things to educators; imitate words and actions; respond when they think a pause is coming; and use words, babbles, signs, and actions to answer questions or continue the conversation.
 - Educators and babies show each other that they are connected by continuing their responsive communication through multiple back-and-forth exchanges.

What benefits do older infants gain from lots of back-and-forth conversation, even when they are not yet using real words?

- Through back-and-forth conversation, older infants:
 - Strengthen their ongoing relationship with adults who are important in their lives.
 - Learn to take turns in a conversation.
 - Learn to communicate in intentional ways and make themselves understood.
 - Begin to see themselves as important, competent people with "things to say" that others want to hear.
 - Learn words, phrases, and concepts.
 - Learn the meaning of words that they can't yet say, but will be able to use once they begin to speak.
 - May learn more than one language if given the opportunity.

What benefits do older infants gain from books and stories?

- Books and stories benefit older infants because they allow older infants to:
 - Look at clear, colorful pictures—something they very much enjoy (especially of other babies).
 - Focus on pictures and associate them with words or sound effects.
 - Learn to handle books and possibly try to turn pages.
 - Learn to associate reading with cuddling and pleasure.
 - Hear full sentences and storybook language such as “Along came the three little pigs” and “In the great green room.”
 - Learn the meaning of words that they are not likely to hear in everyday conversations.
 - Learn to follow a simple story sequence and may begin to learn how to tell a story.
 - Learn to understand that stories have beginnings, middles, and ends.
 - Begin to associate verbal and nonverbal (facial expressions, signs) communications.

What are some effective techniques for supporting and expanding older infants' language as you help them follow a story?

- During story time, an educator can:
 - Let a child choose a favorite book or story for the educator to read or tell.
 - Ask a child to help her tell a familiar story.
 - Use an enticing, expressive voice and exaggerated facial expressions.
 - Ask a question about a picture, story character, or upcoming event, and pause to give a child time to answer.
 - Use signs, gestures, and sound effects to make word meanings clear and to enhance the story.
 - Engage children in imitating or filling in signs, gestures, sound effects, and any words they may know. Pause to let a child fill in an action, word, or sound effect.
 - Act out parts of the story, putting words to actions.
 - Watch children's faces to be sure she has their attention, and vary her pace and expression accordingly.

- Treat older babies as worthy conversation partners. Respond to their signs of interest, spoken and unspoken questions, and participation in the storytelling or reading.

Use Language to Support Exploration and Problem Solving

Older infants need to move freely and explore with a familiar, trusted adult as a secure base. The adult's presence (and reassuring voice when they are separated) gives an older baby confidence to travel further away as she practices crawling, scooting, pulling to a stand, or cruising and as she discovers interesting things and places. The adult's words and actions help the baby learn about her world and other people. At the same time, their interactions support the baby's development of intentional nonverbal communication and, eventually, speech (and/or a signed language).

Through their own activity and play, older babies discover the fundamentals of science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM). As they drop items in a bucket, travel across different surfaces, make their way around obstacles, or use a spoon to bang a drum, they learn how things move and fit into each other, how to solve problems by trying out different strategies, and how they can make interesting things happen, again and again.

- **Talk with babies as they explore spaces and materials that interest them.** As you talk about what the baby is doing, you'll help her learn words for objects and actions. As you converse back and forth, you'll build your relationship along with the child's language.
- **Use language to encourage children's problem-solving efforts and celebrate their successes.** Encouraging words support children's self-confidence, persistence, and language development.

What might older infants be learning as they explore objects, tools, containers, and interesting sensory materials?

- Older infants can learn many things by exploring, including:
 - How to use a tool to accomplish a goal, such as getting something that is out of reach or making an object move in an interesting way.
 - How things (including their own bodies) can move and fit in space.
 - Gross and precise movements involved in lifting, turning, picking up, placing, drumming, etc.

Best Practices (CONTINUED)

- How to make things go faster or farther.
- How to persist at solving problems by trying different strategies.
- Concepts of size, shape, inside/outside, and cause/effect.
- Words for specific objects, materials, actions, categories (for example, flower, tool, container), attributes (for example, shape, size, texture), directions, and relationships (for example, inside, up, on top of).

How can adults use actions and words to facilitate children's explorations?

- Adults can:
 - Create safe spaces for exploration.
 - Offer interesting combinations of materials, including containers, tools, objects, and materials that behave in interesting ways. (Be sure materials do not pose any choking hazards, as older infants will likely put things in their mouths to learn more about them.)
 - Put out a few materials at a time so that children can focus.
 - Allow children to take the lead.
 - Talk about what they notice children doing.
 - Offer help when children seem stuck.
 - Put words to what children may be thinking as they figure things out (for example, "Do you think that will fit better, Alvina?")
 - Describe their own actions or thinking as they demonstrate new possibilities.
 - Offer verbal encouragement and occasional physical support for children's problem-solving efforts but let them work to master a challenge.
 - Comment on children's successful strategies.
 - Reflect children's pride and excitement by using specific words (for example, "You got the rings on the spindle!" rather than just "Good job!") to celebrate their successes.

Help Children Connect with Each Other and Make Friends

Older infants develop an awareness of others. They are drawn to other children and want to play near them, see what they are doing, and sometimes imitate their actions. They want to join in simple group routines. When educators encourage *parallel play* (playing near another child and noticing each other, but without interacting) and imitation, they allow older babies to develop their social emotions, social skills, and sometimes preferences for certain children—their first friends!

Older babies can show remarkable sensitivity. When an older baby hears another baby cry, she may cry in sympathy or try to help. At the same time, older babies can be quite unaware of others' feelings. An older baby doesn't hurt others on purpose, but her exuberance, curiosity, or frustration can sometimes cause problems.

- **Arrange (and rearrange) the environment** so that children can practice emerging motor skills and explore interesting spaces and materials without interfering with each other.
- **Stay alert to prevent hurt feelings and accidental injuries.** Educators can't prevent every bump or toy snatch, but they can help an older baby notice that he hurt another child.
- **Teach empathy and kind behaviors.** Recognize and label children's emotions, model how to help or console another child, and teach "gentle touch."

How can educators facilitate social awareness and beginning friendships for older infants?

- Educators can:
 - Give babies well-supervised opportunities to play near other children.
 - Offer just a few objects for children to play with.
 - Offer duplicate or similar toys so that children can imitate each other.
 - Notice which children like to play near each other, and encourage their friendship with your words, reassuring presence, and nonverbal communication.
 - Offer two older infants a large toy that they can use together, such as a ball to roll back and forth, a large surface to bang on, or a large block to push. Show them how to play together.

Best Practices (CONTINUED)

- Include an older infant in group songs and rituals for brief periods. Feature his name in songs sung frequently. Help him participate by imitating other children's actions, such as bouncing and clapping.

It is common for older infants to knock others over, snatch toys, pull hair, and sometimes bite. How can educators help older infants to learn to empathize and be gentle?

- Educators can:
 - Be mindful of “teachable moments”: respond quickly when a child hurts another child or hurts someone's feelings.
 - Comfort the hurt child and let the hurter see what's happening.
 - Gently include (and if necessary comfort) the hurter, and let him know that the other child needs comforting.
 - Use a calm voice to model comforting behavior.
 - Help the hurter practice gentle touch and comforting.
 - Teach words such as gentle, sorry, and feel better.
 - Put words to children's feelings and actions.
 - Express affection for both children.
 - Help children practice gentle touching with dolls, objects, and pets.
 - Model kind behavior toward children, colleagues, and family members. Remember that older infants sense an educator's positive relationships and look to trusted adults to see who they can trust (social referencing).

Glossary

baby sign language: a set of conventional signs designed to make it easier for older infants and young toddlers to communicate with their caregivers

expressive language/communication: the words and phrases a child speaks and/or the specific, mutually-understood signs and gestures she uses to communicate meaning

joint attention: a shared focus on an item; an older baby and an adult pay joint attention when they notice where the other is looking or pointing (by one year, babies should be able to point, gesture, or vocalize to get an adult to pay attention to something)

parallel play: playing near another child and noticing each other but without interacting

receptive language: the words and phrases a child understands

social referencing: the process by which young children check with trusting adults to see how to react to new situations and people, including whether new people can be trusted

View the self-paced video workshop at <http://resourcesforearlylearning.org/educators>.