

## **Babble: The Building Blocks of Language**

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### **What is babble?**

Babbling is a stage in the development of a child's speech and language skills when strings of speech sounds are produced, but meaningful, recognisable words are not yet used.

There is a pattern to the development of babble that children go through. The first stage involves cooing, followed by strings of repeated sounds (e.g. mememem) known as "reduplicated babble". The child then begins to use a wider range of sounds and begins to use a mixture of sounds together (e.g. bardegoobemar). This is known as "variegated babble". At this stage the child will also use a variety of volumes, tones and pitches in their voice and can appear to be having a "conversation" with you.

### **Why is babble important?**

Babbling allows a child to practise the movements of their jaw, lips and tongue needed for speech. It gives them opportunities to play with the sounds that these movements produce ("babble play"), to listen to themselves making these interesting sounds and to see the reactions they get from the adults around them. It is the start of conversations with others and the stepping stones to spoken language.

### **Should all children babble?**

All hearing children should go through the stages of babble development mentioned above, moving on to spoken words. Research shows that those children who do not babble or are late in their development of babble can have difficulties with their speech and language development when they are older.

### **How does having a cochlear implant affect my child's babble?**

At YAIS (Yorkshire Auditory Implant Service) we are now working with more families of young babies and infants following diagnosis at Universal Newborn Hearing screening. The changes in identification of hearing loss, early amplification and the improvements in the technology available now means that we are seeing better outcomes for these children and have therefore increased expectations for what they are able to achieve. International research findings indicate that children with cochlear implants are developing babble in the first 6 months post implant.

### **What did we do?**

At YAIS we wanted to see if the children with cochlear implants on our caseload were now achieving the expectations mentioned above, and if not, what that meant for the child's future speech and language development. Could we predict future speech and language difficulties before the child's first words were expected by monitoring babble? How could we support families to develop their child's babble?

An audit was completed of the children implanted between September 2012 and March 2016. We looked at whether the children were babbling at 6 months post implant, whether they had a suspected or identified speech and language difficulty at a later stage, if they had worn hearing aids before their implant(s), how old they were at implantation, the time it took for the child to achieve access to speech sounds with their implant(s) and if they had more than one language used in the home.

### **What did we find?**

The results of this audit did not show any significant links between babble and the other variables (e.g. hearing aid use, age at implant, home language). However, a trend was found between those children who were not babbling at 6 months post implant and those who had speech and language difficulties later on.

### **What does this mean?**

From our findings we would therefore suggest that professionals working with young babies / children with cochlear implants monitor the development of babble before first words.

At YAIS parents/carers are informed of the expectations early on following their child's implant(s) and are guided in what to listen for and how to encourage their child's babble as soon as possible. Professionals at YAIS closely monitor this development and provide feedback to families about their child's progress. This allows additional support to be provided at an early stage if needed, rather than using a "watch and wait" approach.

### **How can I help my child to babble?**

Parents/carers play a vital role in helping their child to develop babble. You can help your child in many ways throughout the day; in conversations and play:

- Ensure your child wears their amplification (hearing aids or cochlear implants) for all of their waking hours. This allows them as much chance as possible to listen to your speech and so develop their own.
  - Remember that your child needs to be able to listen to your sounds and to their own speech in order to develop their babble and spoken language. They can only do this when they are wearing their amplification consistently.
- Reduce distractions around your child when you are playing or talking with them.
  - Your child will find it easier to listen to your speech when it is quiet. This is important when they are starting to learn language. Children learn better from listening to live voice rather than a toy, tablet or TV.
- Talk to your child about anything and everything. Talk about what you are doing, what they are playing with, what you can see, what you are going to do next. Name as many things as you can as you come across them (e.g. names of clothes, body parts, toys, food) and name them again and again.
  - Remember that your child needs to listen to spoken words many times in order to begin to make sense of the sounds, to store them, to understand them and to eventually use them. They can only do this if adults around them give them the words to listen to.
- Imitate your child's babble. Listen to the sounds your child makes and copy them so that they are given another chance to hear these and to develop them into more accurate speech sounds. Try adding a few more sounds on your turn. This will give your child a chance to listen to new sounds and will help encourage a wider range of sounds.
  - Remember that your child learns from you and will only increase their range of sounds in babble from those they hear. This type of "conversation" will encourage babble play and turn-taking skills.
- Use an interesting, sing-song voice. This type of voice is much more interesting to a baby / child; therefore gaining their attention and encouraging them to listen to your speech.
  - This does not mean that you have to sing everything that you say! It means using a variety of pitch, volume and tone of voice. It's about making everything seem exciting (even if we adults don't think it is)! Sometimes just using an exaggerated stage-whisper and facial expression is enough to capture your child's attention.
- Use symbolic sounds during routine and play activities. Symbolic sounds are those that refer to feelings (e.g. "mmmmm" – enjoying food), actions (e.g. "knock knock"), situations (e.g. "uh oh" – broken item) and specific items (e.g. animal, vehicle sounds). They are an important step towards first words and are often more interesting to begin with.
  - Remember, as above, that your child needs to learn from you. Using these sounds during as many situations throughout the day as possible will allow your child to listen to them and will be encouraged to copy them.
- Acknowledge any sound or attempt at sounds that your child makes. This can be either through copying what they have said, adding a sound or word, or commenting on their sounds (e.g. "ooh, I like that sound!").
  - Remember that children learn from praise and adult attention. This will encourage your child to try again and to keep practising their sounds.
- Most importantly, have fun interacting with your child.

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