

Building the foundation of language

Children who have missed early experiences that lay the foundations of language may struggle with communication and literacy. As language specialists Helen Ortner and Ian Abbott explain, there is plenty that adoptive parents can do to help build the skills for language as well as promote good attachment.



Early life

Alongside the delight of very early mother-baby interaction to develop bonding, shared attention and the safety to explore the world together, birth to five years is also a crucial time for language and literacy development.



Unfortunately, the early life history of many adopted children involves trauma, neglect and a lack of overall stimulation. They often miss out on formative early experiences that lay the foundations of good language and literacy. Although language ability is innate, babies and young children need to experience reciprocal communication with adults who are attuned to their needs, who mirror and encourage their babbling and early language. Children's language provides a framework to develop literacy skills and thankfully, it's never too late to build these skills and incorporate fun activities into your everyday family life.

What you can do – building communication skills

Many adopted children need to be taught how to listen and 'tune in' to verbal language. Use their name to cue them, say "Listen!" and teach your child how to look at or towards your face. Wait until they are ready to listen and praise each time they do. Capture their attention with simple games which develop shared focus, and concentration such as simple 'Ready-steady-go!' games.

Teach your child that facial expressions provide valuable cues about how others might be feeling, but be aware that your child may be hypervigilant to signs which may mean danger, or may have learnt to keep a low profile by avoiding looking at an unpredictable adult's face.



For children with unintelligible speech or little or no verbal language use a total communication approach. This means encouraging your child to communicate in any way they can, including non-verbal elements such as gestures, pointing and facial expressions or a signing system such as Makaton to supplement their words. Model language so the child can hear good language even if they are unable to use the words themselves. Use multisensory experiences inside and outside to stimulate your child's senses and learn language in context, for example learning the word 'jump' by jumping on a trampoline together!

Remember that your child may also have gaps in their understanding. Tell-tale signs may be a lack of response to their name or to simple instructions, or an unusual reply to a question. Children who cannot communicate effectively tend to get frustrated very easily as they can't tell you what the problem is, or don't understand what you expect of them. Be empathic when your adopted child's behaviour is challenging – think about what your child is trying to communicate.

Early language and literacy

Good literacy typically follows from good language. Reading relies on phonological skills, defined as our ability to discern and work with 'word-sounds' within spoken language – for example, to say "cat" with an 'h' as "hat". Phonological skills develop as children begin learning to read, but could be primed before then. Many children's songs often feature lots of rhyming and alliteration, for example, as two important phonological skills.

Even the rhythm of language is important. The exaggerated 'melody' of speech as an adult speaks with their child – sometimes called parent or Motherese – is now believed to 'train the brain', preparing it for early speech perception. The characteristic frequency of around 2Hz within Motherese, coincides with the stressed syllables of speech and the tempo of common nursery rhymes. Rhymes and songs are not only good fun, but they may have a preparatory role in language development.



What you can do – building learning skills



Enjoying a book together is a great way to become close with your child. Shared reading, even from very young, can develop speech, listening and attention skills. It also fosters curiosity and the child's 'hungry eye', exploring images with 'lift the flap' books or stimulating picture books, and early book behaviours are modelled –

holding the book; turning the pages etc. As you share reading, your child begins to understand reading as an enjoyable and important activity. It is also a non-threatening way to promote positive attachment.

Think about Motherese and the rhythmical, playful language of nursery rhymes. Movement and rhythm, for example when clapping, dancing or skipping, might be similarly beneficial for early language. Stories, rhymes and poems also have structure and a child's familiarity with these supports them later in the classroom, helping to make predictions with similar genres.

For visual and motor skills, crafting and making activities are excellent for hand-eye co-ordination, especially alongside another. Sharing provides opportunities for speaking, listening and showing. Language aside, demonstrating any skill through a simple sequence is beneficial, cognitively speaking; working memory – our capability to step through sequences and information in our heads – begins to develop through early structure and routines, first at play and later in school. Crucially, all these activities can support learning and literacy skills.

Helen and Ian's simple strategies

- If you're worried about your child's communication skills, request a Speech and Language Assessment through your GP or school and check their hearing – 'glue ear' is common and often causes speech problems.
- Incorporate language and literacy into your daily structure. Examples are a 'hands on' daily calendar, talking about what day it is and helping to find the right words. Support routines such as bedtime with words and pictures showing the sequence to follow.
- Start with what your child is interested in or good at, and have fun!
- Keep things simple, short and sweet. Little and often is better for all of us, even adults. Gradually increase the time when your child is capable.
- Muting the TV during the advert break, and enjoying two or three minutes of a shared activity, talk or short story, can soon add up.
- Use nursery rhymes and simple songs which have lots of structure and repetition of useful vocabulary. Use rhythm and rhyme to make up your own silly songs.
- Expand on your child's language – "tractor" becomes "Yes, a big red tractor!"
- Encourage an active 'hungry eye' with talk and picture books, rather than passive, silent watching of TV programmes.

Helen and Ian are specialists in autism, language, learning and associated behaviours and support children and young people with Special Educational Needs, in and out of school. Helen is also an adoptive parent and both are familiar with the particular challenges faced by adoptive families. Find out more on their website www.unravelled.info