



Parentese

Why the funny voice?

Adults often already use sing-song speech and big facial expressions when they talk with babies. We stretch out the sounds of the words, and we love to make funny facial expressions. We also tend to repeat the same words or phrases over and over. Researchers call the way we talk to babies “motherese,” “parentese,” or, more accurately, “caretakerese.” This unusual way of talking helps infants learn language. The stretched out vowels, high pitch, big facial expressions, and repeated words and phrases help babies learn sounds.

In fact, researchers have found that infants prefer parentese to the sounds of normal adult conversation.

Not baby talk!

“Parentese” is not baby talk, with made-up words and babble. It is “real” words spoken in a higher pitch and sing-song tone of voice. Baby talk is not bad, but parentese is better because babies build their vocabulary as they learn real words.

Learning the sounds of speech

- Since babies seem to prefer the higher vocal pitch, speaking in parentese can help get their attention.
- The short and simple sentences of parentese, often repeated over and over again, may help babies figure out words.
- Hearing the exaggerated sounds of parentese may also make it easier for infants to learn the sounds of their own language.
- Research shows that minutes after birth, babies can recognize and will turn their head toward “familiar” sounds and voices.

“Face time”

Face-to-face contact helps infants see how we move our mouths to make sounds.

- Babies will try to read your lips to understand how you are making sounds.
- Research shows that very young babies will turn to look at the face that matches the sound they hear (for example, the vowel sounds “ah” and “ee”).

- Babies are not just listening to your voice, they are also watching your face and your mouth.
- Researchers have found that five-month-old babies can do simple lip-reading.

Live action

Babies learn language from interaction with the people who care for and talk to them throughout the day. Babies need practice hearing language and encouragement as they start to make these sounds.