

What is receptive language?
Parent-Infant Communication, 1985
Handout – Parent Language Development Objective 12

We have already learned that the earliest communication that takes place between an infant and his caretakers is called “presymbolic communication.” A baby learns to understand the feelings his parents convey to him through their body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. A baby understands smiles, hugs, soft loving voices, angry voices and mad faces long before he understands words. As the baby grows and develops, he also learns to understand gestures. He is not yet understanding words, so this communication is still called presymbolic communication.

When a baby learns to recognise and understand words, we say that he is acquiring “receptive language”. Receptive language is the symbols that a person understands. A child gains meaning from what is said and not only from the words that are used, but also from the word order, intonation, and changes in rate and volume of what is said.

As the child approaches a year of age he begins to understand what some words mean. He begins to recognise the intonation and rhythmic patterns of frequently heard phrases and sentences. He doesn’t understand every word in the question. “Do you want to go bye-bye?” but he recognises the word “bye-bye” and the pattern of the question so he responds with eagerness. As the child has more and more listening experience he learns that all the words in a sentence have meaning. When he learns to listen for and understand every word, he can tell the difference between instructions such as “Put the ball on the table”, and “Put the ball under the table”.

How will you know when your child understands language? A child has receptive language when he knows what words mean without the help of situation clues. You will be able to tell that your child has acquired receptive language: He waves when you say “bye-bye”, he claps his hands when you say “pat-a-cake”. You know your child is understanding when you say, “It’s time for bed,” and he runs the other way! He has receptive language when he hears you say “Daddy” and knows what you are talking about even though no situational clues – Daddy or any of the objects associated with Daddy – are present.

All parents are anxious for their baby to express himself through talking. It is important for parents to remember that a child must learn to understand language before he can use language to communicate his own thoughts, feelings and needs. If you want your child to use symbolic language to communicate, you must take the time to help him learn the symbols (words) used in communicating. You must give him the opportunity to hear these symbols associated with the object or idea many times. Helping you child develop good receptive language is essential to his being able to understand you and to begin expressing himself through speech.