

Growing Concerns

A parenting question-and-answer column with Dr. Martha Erickson of the University of Minnesota

Question: We recently watched a video of when my now 4-year-old daughter was the age of our 20-month-old son. It was amazing how much more verbal she was at his age. She would say "No, Mommy!" and could also sing most of "Happy Birthday to You." My son isn't nearly as verbal. His version of "no" is "uh-uh." I don't think we've read as much to our son as we did to our daughter, although now his bedtime routine includes books. I'm afraid he may have suffered from being the second child. Should I worry? Have I done something wrong and if so what can I do to fix it?

Answer: You're not the first parents to worry that a second child lags behind the developmental pace of the firstborn. Most of us find that, with subsequent children, we never quite can match that total, undivided attention we gave to our first baby. But that doesn't mean that a second child's slower pace of development is the result of parental neglect. Even within the same family, each child is unique and develops at his or her own individual pace. Many times a child's developmental rate varies across different domains. For example, a child may seem advanced in verbal skills, but slower in developing motor skills -- or vice versa. Sometimes a second child in the family might develop spoken language more slowly because big brother or big sister speaks for them -- or doesn't let them get a word in edgewise! And some children just seem to have a personality that leads them to listen and absorb for many months, then suddenly begin speaking in complete sentences.

Whatever the reason for your son's slower pace of language development, it's not at all uncommon for a 20-month-old to not have a large vocabulary. At this tender age, your son still has many opportunities to benefit from your love, attention and stimulation. Here are some of the things to focus on as you gently support his growth and learning:

- Talk to your son as you go through your daily activities together. Describe what he's doing, seeing, touching and tasting.
- Use music or rhymes to help your son discover the joy of language. Clap your hands, dance around the room, and repeat the same songs

until he becomes familiar with them. Before long he'll probably be able to fill in the blank if you leave out the last word of a familiar line.

- Continue to make time to read with your son each day. Take your cues from him, letting him choose his favorite picture stories and reading only as long as he's interested.
- Follow his interests, finding stories and language-based activities that focus on things he likes. For example, if he's crazy about trains or puppies or clowns, work those into your games and reading time.
- Give him chances to use words to express his choices. For example, in the morning put out two shirts and ask him to choose the blue one or the red one. Or encourage him to tell you if he wants cereal or toast for breakfast. Even if he can't say the words yet, learning to understand the question is a big part of language development.

Certainly if you see other signs that your son is lagging developmentally -- or if you see no sign of progress in spoken language over the next few months -- talk to your pediatrician and request a developmental screening. But for now, focus on providing a rich language environment for your son and watch how he responds. Hopefully soon he'll master many words, including that powerful word "no." Then you may be longing for the good old days when he didn't know how to say it!