Help develop your baby's language skills with these two practices

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This is the fourth in a series of articles that follows the writer along on her parenthood journey. Past stories have explored the University's parental leave policy [1], shared parenting advice [2] from faculty and staff and introduced new lactation spaces [3] on campus. Have ideas for future stories? Please email them to mikaylamace@arizona.edu [4].

Most nights, my spouse, Connor, and I follow a bedtime routine for our 10-month-old son, Milo. After bathing him, we turn on his sound machine, which plays a song. We put on his pajamas and sleep sack and read him three or four short books. Then, I nurse him, or Connor feeds him a bottle, before we lay him down in his crib and switch the sound machine to white noise.

We heard that sleep routines – a series of actions done in the same order every night – help babies develop a regular sleep schedule and, by extension, leads to better overall sleep for baby and parents. We use the sounds to signal that bedtime is approaching and threw in reading to instill a love of books.

So far, our routine has served us well. Milo winds down easily and usually sleeps through the night. He also seems to enjoy his books.

But after a conversation with Rebecca Gómez, a psychology professor of 25 years and director of the Child Cognition Lab, we learned that there's another major benefit to our evening routine.

"Establishing a regular sleep schedule and reading to your child are two really important things you can do early on for your child's language development," Gómez said.

Sleeping

Gómez sited a large Canadian study from 2007 to emphasize how important sleep is to language development. The researchers found an association between children aged 2 to 6 who consistently slept less than 10 hours a night and had a poor vocabulary in kindergarten [7]. What's more, even if the participants corrected their sleep by age 3, they still tended to be at higher risk for lower verbal performance.

If sleep does in fact help develop vocabulary, there are many ways to ensure good sleep for your baby. A consistent bedtime routine is one important strategy. Bedtime routines don't have to be long or complex. Simply three or four habitual activities can lead to less time falling asleep, longer sleep and fewer night awakenings [8], according to the National Sleep Foundation. It's also important to note that children of different ages require different amounts of sleep [9] and periods of time when babies who once sleep well seem to get worse – called sleep regressions – are normal.

(Gómez’s favorite book to recommend to new parents to guide them through their child's first years of life is “Sleeping Through the Night” by Jodi A. Mindell.)

It's also important to be aware that there are conditions that can make achieving good sleep difficult, such as obstructive sleep apnea.

Pediatrics assistant professor Daniel Combs, who studies this sleep disorder, suggests parents should be concerned if they hear choking or gasping during sleep. Snoring while not sick is potentially another symptom, but not always. Babies with Down syndrome are especially susceptible to the disorder.

If you're concerned that your child might have sleep apnea, you should bring this up with your pediatrician to discuss a possible sleep study [10] or a referral to pediatric sleep medicine [11], Combs said.

Reading

Reading is not only an easy way to round out your bedtime routine, but it's also a great activity to develop your child's vocabulary from a very early age, Gómez said.

"The science around language development shows that it's important for children to hear language and to hear a lot of it," Gómez said. "Early in development, children's vocabulary is a real marker for how well they're going to be able to read. In turn, becoming a skilled reader by the third grade is very important for success in school. That's about the time that your reading skill is established, and a lot of learning relies on children reading by themselves."

Luckily, there's no evidence that you have to read to your child in a special way to see benefits, Gómez said. That means it's OK to either read in a normal voice or in what's called "motherese." The act alone results in major impact.

"Motherese, or child-directed speech, is often what you hear when people talk to babies or pets," she said. "It's much
more emotional or has a singsong quality with lots of pitch changes. It’s much more interesting to listen to, so we know infants pay more attention to child-directed speech. But I don’t know of research that shows that those children learn better and have better language skills because of it."

Reading has many other benefits as well.

"It’s the closeness, it’s the shared activity and the value in reading that you convey even at this early age," she said.

Sign up

Gómez studies more than sleep and language development. The Child Cognition Lab also explores how children learn and remember, and how learning and memory change as the brain develops. She has many ongoing studies, some fully online. Learn more about her research on the lab’s website [6] and sign up to participate [12].

Mikayla Mace Kelley is a science writer for University Communications and a new mom.

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