



➤ There are great differences between one-and-a-half-year-olds when it comes to their word treasure. The speed at which a word is recognized seems to be a determining factor in this. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO/GETTY IMAGES

Learning language: here's how to help your child

Children naturally pick up language from their speaking environment. There are no golden tips for speeding up that process enormously. But you can help your child acquire language, and enjoy it at the same time.

- Let your child talk quietly and encourage them.
- Take the time to listen and respond.
- Reading aloud and games are great tools.
- If your child says something wrong, do not correct. Answer and say about the same thing, but in the right way.
- Marvel at the lightning-fast growth of vocabulary and the picking up of grammar rules, even when it results in errors such as "I walked."
- Some children pick up language faster than others; this is a natural thing. Should you suspect that something is really wrong, visit your family doctor or consultation office.

Language research One child can talk faster than the other

Toddler picks up language at own pace

Virtually all children learn to talk, but the speed at which- varies enormously. Some know over 150 words by the time they are 1, others barely 15. "But it almost always works

out," says language researcher Julia

Degger

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he Austrian Julia Egger, a language researcher at the Max Planck Institute for Psycholinguistics (MPI) in Nijmegen, will receive her doctorate next Thursday on research into how children learn language. "I have always been interested in language, and how we learn languages.

I also started learning Dutch," says Egger, who speaks excellent Dutch.

She studied how babies and toddlers up to the age of one and a half, in whom vocabulary skyrockets, learn their first language. They are the most talented language learners. Although there are also big differences. Some one-and-a-half-year-olds talk incessantly, while others know only a few words at that age.

Researchers of language development (and some parents) wondered where it is. "We know it has to do with parental language use," Egger says.

The study showed that when parents talk a lot to their child and use more words, their children generally also have a more extensive vocabulary. However, this does not explain everything. Sometimes one child is a lot faster or slower than a sister or brother.

"I investigated the influence of processing speed. That's how fast you recognize a word," Egger explains. Children with a high- re processing speed generally know more words, but the direction of that

connection is not entirely clear. Egger: "Does a larger vocabulary help you recognize words faster? Or is it precisely the faster recognition that makes your vocabulary grow faster?"

Enthusiastic participants

It could also be that the two reinforce each other. To put his finger on that, Egger studied children as young as one and a half years old. "The child then sits on the lap of a parent in our baby lab in Nijmegen and looks at a screen. On it he sees, for example, an apple and a coat. If you then say, 'Look, one coat,' you can use eye-tracking equipment to measure how long it takes the child to look from the ball to the coat." More than two hundred babies underwent this test. "What surprised me is how easily all these parents came here. They get nothing in return, but were often very enthusiastic and interested," Egger said.

Still, working with other people can be quite frustrating at times. "They just don't have such a long attention span," says

'Learning speed is partly related to parents' use of language, we know'

Egger. Sometimes the computer screen just can't captivate them. "Then they look way too short, or not at all. And sometimes they try to swipe."

Fortunately, she found something on that. "If the child hears 'look, one apple' while already looking at the apple, there is nothing to measure," Egger explained. She realized that the eye-tracking equipment can also determine what the child is looking at before- that something is said. "So I programmed the test setup so that the child always hears the other word, so he does have to switch. That produced many more successful tests."

Researchers after her can also use this improved design. In addition, Egger examined the children and parents while they were playing and talking together.

Long sentences

Processing speed, as far as Egger could tell, ultimately does not play a major role when it comes to the relationship between parental speech and the child's vocabulary. "In my study that was not evident, so maybe it proceeds in a different way," Egger said.

However, children with a high rate of processing do seem to be better able to extract information from long sentences. An unfinished study is testing whether there is a relationship between how frequently a word was used in parents' speech and processing speed. The question is whether words like "ball" are recognized faster than words like "elephant."

They are puzzle pieces, with the larger goal of understanding in detail how children learn language. Egger: "Ultimately, you want to be able to use that to help children who have language disorders or major delays."

