

LEARNING TO TALK

Folkways Records FX 6271

A Study in Sound of Infant Speech Development, by Margaret Greene, F.C.S.T.



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1963
c.1

MUSIC LP

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SOUNDS OF:
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IN A FEW WEEKS
SOCIAL RESPONSES
COMFORT SOUNDS
THE ARTICULATE SOUND
THE IMITATIVE SOUND
INTONATION AND RHYTHM
MISPRONOUNCED WORDS
SEQUENCE OF SOUNDS
WHAT'S THIS? STAGE
VOCABULARY HELP
REPETITION OF PHRASES
EXPLANATION OF THINGS AND EVENTS
ARTICULATION

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A Study in Sound of Infant Speech Development

Read by

Margaret Greene, F.C.S.T.

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SIDE I

Band 1:

This record illustrates the way a baby learns to talk and describes the various stages he passes through before gaining intelligible speech. Some insight into what is going on can increase one's enjoyment of a child's speech development and will help you understand the difficulties he will encounter while learning. As we go on I shall tell you how to help your child at this enchanting time, when his personality is unfolding through speech.

When you consider that speech, as we use it, is an acquired and highly developed skill, it is quite astonishing how quickly and easily a child does learn to talk when all he can manage at birth is this -

No. 1 Newborn.

But, after a few weeks a change is already apparent -

No. 2 Nicholas

And in about two years time a child may be able to express thoughts quite clearly, like this little girl -

No. 3 Annabel

Band 2:

Of course children vary a great deal in rate of development in all fields and especially where speech is concerned. Little boys, on the whole, speak clearly somewhat later than little girls and have more difficulty in acquiring good pronunciation - probably because they are rather less well co-ordinated in the early years. Although the majority of children say their first word round about 12 to 14 months, many do not do so until 6 months later and though many speak fluently and clearly at 3 years, others don't until 4 or even 5 - and this sort of range can be regarded as quite normal.

A great deal depends of course on the amount of help a mother gives her baby with speech in the first year and after. Unlike learning to sit, to crawl, and to walk - which he can manage without much help when he is physiologically ready - a child doesn't learn to talk without much patient teaching from his parents, and especially his mother who is in constant contact with him in the early years. Actually "teaching" is not quite the word to use - "sympathetic communication" between mother and child is more what I mean. This communication between the mother and her baby should be established at the very beginning - at the first feed loving words and tenderness should enfold a baby, and intermingle with the satisfaction and content of a good warm meal. This relationship is an absolute essential for a child's emotional well being, as well as for his speech development.

Because a baby doesn't understand speech it does not mean that talking to him is a waste of time. Quite the contrary in fact - in a matter of only 2 or 3 weeks, a baby begins to respond to your talking to him and can be soothed to a certain extent even when desperate with hunger. Here is a young mother pacifying her fretful 6 weeks' old baby while she dresses him after his bath, and see how well she succeeds - staving off the persistent yells demanding food -

No. 4 Nicholas

Band 3:

Round about this time a baby shows his first elementary social responses; he discriminates between a loving voice and an impatient or scolding tone and will cry, not smile, if spoken to unkindly. His smile - often given freely to anyone nearby - is an important piece of social behaviour; baby finds that smiling usually brings a pleasant response in the form of tender words and cuddles. This interplay is necessary for the development of social behaviour and because baby's sight is not yet trained to distinguish between one person and another, the use of speech and the sound of your voice is most important.

Although baby does not yet understand actual words he begins to absorb gradually the melody of speech and understand the linguistic content of what you're saying when feeding, bathing, dressing and playing with him. So talk to your baby as much as you can when looking after his needs.

Between 3 and 4 months - sometimes sooner - there's an important change in baby's vocalisation: at first he only cries when he feels hungry or uncomfortable, but now he begins to make happy little sounds when lying awake after a feed, cooings and gurglings - sounds which will later become the vowels of speech. This vocalisation is not, as yet, well co-ordinated, so baby may get quite worked up and excited, panting and puffing and choking. This baby girl's efforts at 3 months are typical -

No. 5 Hazel

Band 4:

And, quite different from the flustered female you have just heard, this little fellow - also 3 months old - has invented a very satisfying and rather unusual sort of hum, and one can understand perfectly why these little songs have been called "comfort sounds".

No. 6 Keith

Once your baby can produce these sociable and unaggressive sounds it is perfectly possible to have quite a conversation with him - at least he talks back in his own rudimentary way. It doesn't need much imagination for instance to realise that in this exchange between mother and 10 weeks' old baby there does exist the early origins of speech.

No. 7 Michael

Now syllables appear, consisting of a vowel and consonant, these are the raw materials, the bricks and mortar, from which words will later be built - here are some of the conventional ones -

No. 8 - 9 Andrew

But there are the less conventional ones which will be discarded later in the learning of real word forms -

No. 8 - 9 Stephen

Band 5:

This vocal play is an inborn, inherited human trait, common to all babies, an instinctive activity quite without meaning. However, the moment recognisable syllables appear, parents seize upon them with delight and invest them with meaning; this is how the tiny child learns his first nursery words. There's no harm at all in teaching nursery words,

by the way, though it's often considered old fashioned; these nursery names taken from a child's babble vocabulary serve an extremely useful purpose in that they are easily articulated by the child long before he can manage mature articulation. The main object at a year is to get a child to use an articulate sound with meaning. The sound then attains the status of a word and it doesn't really matter what that sound is half so much as that he's using it consistently for an object as a symbol, and not until this happens can he be said to be really talking. For this concept is the seed without which all speech cannot grow.

No. 10 Keith

Band 6:

The next important landmark occurs around 8 months when an infant who has been babbling spontaneously and without much apparent awareness of what he's about, suddenly develops the ability to make similar sounds when prompted by an adult. In the following recording you can hear how this excellent mother picks out two vowel sounds which vaguely resemble "hullo" and gets her 8 month old boy to imitate "hullo", thus beginning to teach him to use these syllables as a form of greeting - and you can see how utterly ridiculous it would be to try teaching him at this stage "good morning" or even "how do you do".

No. 11 Michael

Of course all this time the infant's intelligence has been developing and with it his capacity for understanding speech, and when the three factors of understanding, babbling and imitation combine they can be put to their full use in teaching by the parents.

No. 12 Andrew

Band 7:

At about 12 months a baby may be expected to use one or two words consistently and meaningfully and this is a major event indeed, he has really begun to talk. Parents may now feel justly proud, not only of their child, but of themselves as experts in child management.

No. 13 Jeremy

You would now expect the toddler to go right ahead and talk non-stop, but in fact this is not so and he will probably acquire only a few more words in the next half year. Understanding increases by leaps and bounds as can be seen by the quite complicated instructions the toddler can follow, but it seems that he is too active and busy now that he can walk to make use of speech as a tool for getting what he wants. Everything has to be explored, investigated and experimented with at first hand. The boundless energy of the "little nipper" and his insatiable curiosity keep him absorbed in the end-

less mysteries of his widening world. So he explores and plays all day long - though he is seldom silent, composing long and pleasing running commentaries for himself - amusingly similar to speech in their intonation and rhythm.

No. 14 Alan

Most children are musical and greatly enjoy listening to nursery rhymes and will even bounce to the rhythm as early as 9 months or a year, while in the second year they compose their own little chants like this -

No. 15 Andrew

Some children are extremely voluble, using a babble jargon so realistically one feels it isn't just "pretend talking" but really must mean something to the child. This "talking scribble" as it is sometimes called at least tides the infant over the tedious time when a good deal of cogitation is going on in his little head though the means to express it is not yet at hand and the desire to do so is very strong. One wonders what on earth all this can be about for instance -

No. 16 Alan

The sounds the child uses meaning fully, the first words, are in the beginning not very distinguishable from babble sounds because consonants are indistinct and pronunciation pretty mixed up. Mother is usually the only one who can understand to begin with. Words, though mutilated and distorted, are just recognisable because they are used consistently by the child; a mother learns the code and can translate the infant speech into the conventional word forms.

No. 17 Alan

And it is most important of course that a mother should understand what her child says in order to spare him the extreme frustration of not being understood and losing confidence in his speech; she should repeat what he says in the correct way so that he can hear what it should sound like. There is no need to set out deliberately to correct pronunciation, so long as you speak slowly and clearly the right way a child will adopt that pronunciation when he is ready - which is when he is old enough to do so. At first his muscular coordination is inadequate so his tongue cannot possibly achieve the split second changes in position to produce consonant and vowel sequences accurately. The difficulties of this little mite talking about Waterloo Station are very evident.

No. 18 Alan

SIDE II

Band 1:

Almost all words are mispronounced at first. I don't in the least believe mothers who tell me

that their children have always spoken perfectly - no use of baby talk at all. It's absolutely normal for a child to say "tat" for "cat" or "goggy" for "doggy" and so forth. Pairs of consonants also give difficulty, so one of a pair is omitted to begin with as when a toddler says "ting" for "sting" -

No. 19 - 20 Alan

or this little girl saying "lippers" for "slippers", although she does get it right in the end -

No. 19 - 20 Annabel

Another trouble occurs over recalling the correct sequence of sounds, although the child has no difficulty when he hears the correct form. Note how these children correct themselves without the adult drawing particular attention to the mistake - the word "orange" in this instance -

No. 21 - 22 Michael

And in this example, the word "scarecrow" -

No. 21 - 22 Lynne

Band 2:

Besides the problem of acquiring the correct sounds which represent words there is also the problem of placing these words in the right order to express a coherent thought: but a youngster - especially a two year old - doesn't bother much about this. He expresses himself in an exclamatory fashion - like a telegram - a word or two making do for whole sentences.

Towards the end of the second year a child suddenly develops an extraordinary interest in the names of things, "What's this?" he enquires constantly -

No. 23 Andrew

Although it can be really tiresome, be patient; his little brain is like a thirsty sponge and able to absorb words at an astonishing rate - they are not going in at one ear and coming out at the other as one might suspect.

No. 24 Annabel

Band 3:

A child is said to acquire about 50 new words a month and although he may use only 100 perhaps at the age of 2 years, he may use 400 at 2 1/2. So you see it is important to tell your child what everything is as he asks - although when you can't stand it any longer you can generally head him off by asking him questions as this mother does -

No. 25 Alan

From 2 years onwards a child loves picture books and an explanation of what they're all about. This is a good way of enlarging his horizon and teaching a great deal of language, besides, at the same time, fostering an appreciation of books and gently paving the way for formal education.

No. 26 Alan

Band 4:

In the third year the child's speech is characterised by much repetition of little phrases - it is his way of learning the word order of sentences and grammatical constructions. He carries on his language exercises in this fashion -

No. 27 Alan

At about the end of the third year, there is another big landmark in speech history and this is heralded in by the demands, "what is that for?", "where?", "when?", "what are you doing today?", "why?", etc.

No. 28 Alan

Band 5:

Having acquired a useful vocabulary a child now needs explanations of things and events. The answers you give should be simple and straightforward thus providing the information needed at that moment and also the means by which he can work things out for himself by drawing simple conclusions from observed facts. Although the conclusions he arrives at are often charmingly naive because his experience is so limited, they do nevertheless, presage the dawn of reason and reveal his developing intelligence.

No. 29 Alan

No matter how elementary the problem puzzling the child you should explain what he wants to know and never laugh at his simplicity - even when it is a matter so obvious as to how a monkey, a giraffe, a tortoise and a cow can pick a daisy - this delightful conversation demonstrates exactly the nature of a child's observation and reasoning at this stage; he must be told why before he can understand why and then make a deduction. This intelligent youngster concludes quite rightly that a giraffe and a cow have to bend down to pick a daisy, but a tortoise has not -

No. 30 Alan

Band 6:

As the 3 year old attains mastery over speech, he begins to formulate explanations of his own and to fabricate little stories; this shows a healthy imagination - fact and fiction are mixed together in play and this sort of activity should be given full rein.

These children - the boy 2 1/2. the girl 4 - are setting sail on board the upturned kitchen table -

No. 31 Jan and Neil

Plenty of help is still needed while experience is so limited. This little boy manages - with much difficulty and hesitation - to convey the difference between his toy pigs and the real pigs on the farm; when his uncle offers further information the child turns to his mother for assurance before accepting the new idea.

No. 32 Michael

Band 7:

Little hesitations are bound to arise when experience in the use of speech is so limited. Very often a child finds his little world so exciting and his thoughts run so fast, he simply can't get the words out in time. For weeks, and sometimes, months, the quick witted and inventive child may hesitate quite noticeably - repeating syllables without apparently being aware of it himself. But let him remain unaware; never draw attention to it and never refer in his presence to stammering. He is not stammering but simply working through a perfectly normal phase in speech development. The best thing to do is to take no notice whatever except to help him out when he is really at a loss for the right word.

No. 33 Susan

Band 8:

If the child is happy and secure and has been given sufficient encouragement with speech in the preceding years he should soon grow out of it and become more fluent. But if he does not by 4 years, do ask your doctor to refer you to a speech therapist for advice.

From 4 to 5 the youngster consolidates what he has already learned, articulation matures and skill in expressing his thoughts increases steadily. One realises with regret - perhaps tinged with relief - that infancy is now over; your child has completed the first stage in the business of growing up and is now ready for the second - the embarking alone on the great venture of school - like these four-year-olds in a nursery class -

No. 34 Nursery School.

From now on knowledge of the language and fluency in self-expression will be of increasing importance in acquiring social skills and formal education. Every child must be allowed to go at his own pace in learning to talk, but you should provide the needed speech stimulus on every possible occasion and so help to equip the youngster with the verbal tools so vital to the full development of his innate abilities.