

Baby Talk

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Mothers, Fathers, children, complete strangers with no children, even monkeys, from all over the world do it when faced with a baby. Experts who first began researching the phenomenon coined the term Motherese. Then decades later as the role of the father as a caretaker in the life of a baby began getting some attention it was changed to Parentese. Whatever you want to call, if you are a new parent it is a part of your life and it is baby talk. If Attachment Parenting (AP) and Infant Massage are about listening to your innate wisdom as a parent, Parentese is one of the most basic, universal, and tangible examples of our innate parenting wisdom.

So, what is Parentese? If even non-parents and monkeys do it, how do we know what it really is? Is there a Parentese 101 class at the local community college? No, but there are some general criteria that define speaking Parentese:



- High pitch
- Sing-song (up and down) smooth flow, rhythmic nature
- Soft edges, breathy starts and stops
- Focus on concrete words ("cookie" rather than "liberty")
- Short sentences with simple grammar ("What a pretty dolly!")
- Repetition ("Birdie! See the birdie! Did you see the birdie?")
- Expansion of the child's utterance ("Dada goed?Yes, Daddy went to work.")
- Reference to the environment (e.g., Pointing to a cookie when saying, "Do you want a cookie?")
- Slow
- Visually exaggerated
- Close proximity. Note: We don't consciously know why we lean in to speak to a baby but following our innate wisdom usually steers us right. A newborn can only see 6-12" (the distance from breast to mother's face).

Research has taught us that baby talk maps the brain for speech. It does this in several ways. First, when you speak Parentese you are tuning into the frequency of babies.



Research has shown us that when listening to Parentese their brains fire like crazy compared to listening to adult speak. Research has also shown us that if two adults are on opposite sides of an infant and one is speaking Parentese while one is speaking adult speak, the infant will turn toward the adult speaking Parentese every time. This teaches us that Parentese captures their attention and capturing the attention of an infant is no small feat. When an infant turns to face a speaking adult, they make eye contact, visually absorbing all of the cues for language. They focus their listening toward the speaker. This task requires significant

effort and concentration on the part of a newborn, in particular. To listen to a speaker you must not merely hear what they are saying but tune out all extraneous sounds. Capturing an infant's attention in this way not only shows and tells them how to speak but builds the brain's capacity to focus attention.

Speaking Parentese promotes the interactional nature of language. Babies are frequently spoken to, but not as much spoken with. "Eat." "Sit." "No." "Hug." On a most basic level language gives a child the tools they need to get what they want. But speaking Parentese unlocks the more complex and advantageous understanding of language as a tool for interaction. A conversation is like a game of ping-pong and the sing-song, up and down, back and forth nature of Parentese teaches infants that language is not just a series of commands but a verbal interaction with another person. As such, Parentese is an important tool for bonding. In addition to earning attention, it teaches reading and responding to each others' cues. It opens the door to mirroring, raising your baby's Emotional IQ (EQ), and advancing their social development.

In our attempt to control that which comes naturally (just speak to someone in the natural birth movement about the medicalization of child birth) and prematurely push the Western ideal of independence (have a conversation with anyone who supports cosleeping regarding

the commercialization of the nursery), some are opting to rewrite their parenting genetic code. Have you ever seen a parent try to talk to their infant strictly in adult speak? It is sad and looks uncomfortable. With every word they speak it looks as if they are forcibly swallowing down the natural song of infant communication and fists clenched driving the car down the road of independence. I want to take their hands in mine and say, "Surrender!" I staunchly believe (this opinion was largely formed during my work with child



abusing parents) that every parent wakes up wanting to be a good parent. They wake up loving their child, wanting to do the best they can, and hoping today is better than yesterday. I know that this hard swallowing of intuition and fists clenched seizing of control is them genuinely trying to do what they think (or have been told) is best for their child. Well I am here to lovingly tell you, "Surrender!" Parentese is what's best for your baby.

Go forth and babble in the knowledge that you are doing what's best for your baby. You have the urge to talk in this sometimes embarrassing fashion for a reason, trust it. If you ever have to stop at a gas station in the middle of night with your baby in toe, it is highly likely that you could witness an intimidating shady, fellow of a man melt and out of his mouth will come a voice 3 octaves higher than you would have ever expected. He is listening to his innate wisdom, doing what comes naturally. It takes a village to raise a child and our genetic code knows it. Love your baby, interact with your baby, converse with your baby, trust in yourself, and babble with pride. Speak her language. Baby talk is the road to language development.