

Your baby's moo is a real mouthful if you listen



JERRY CAMMARATA FATHER'S DIARY

You had some time to think about Moo. Do you know what it really means? Suspense for just a moment longer!

Please don't get the impression that the process of learning to say words is as simple as I presented in my last column; those of you who have struggled with Piaget, Myklebust, Perkins and Vygotsky among others, know that the learning processes of life are complex and, in the case of learning to use speech and language, not even completely understood. However, it is healthy for us as parents to think of our children as systematically reliable wonders who, when you least expect it, will do the unexpected. Some of our children will blossom early and others later. Scientists have worked very hard to give us performance tables that for your Johnny, Gwenda, Peter and even my Gerald, will be more accurate than you would think possible.

So it is, simple as it was presented, your one-year-old child says to you, "Moo!" You may think he is saying milk, but in reality he is saying a mouthful. Consider this meaning: "Mom, I'm hungry and want my snack. Put me in the highchair and go to the closet next to the refrigerator and take out the red tupperware bowl with my favorite vanilla wafers. Now, go to the refrigerator, open the door and, on the top shelf, take out the one half gallon bottle of milk and pour some into my blue cup. Be sure to put a teaspoon of sugar in it, and please don't forget my striped straw."

Hard to believe but it's all true. Of course, your one-year-old child is not saying all those words but he or she has been privy to your

kitchen work, and he or she has seen you go through a certain routine day after day and month after month. With just one word, Moo, your child is requesting you to perform predictably and without haste. In fact, your child expects no more or less than what he or she has been used to. Using this telegraphic speech pattern at a year old, your child is demonstrating the power of a word. He or she knows something can be said and a reaction or action can be predicted. It will be that very strategy that will provide the motivation to learn more and more words. Welcome to your child's world of True Speech.

From the standpoint of control of muscles, your one-year-old is not really ready for the parallel bars or riding a two-wheeler. Regarding speech, he or she is also not ready to articulate those rather exotic yet beautiful sounds like L, R, SH and J. No wonder why the word Moo is used and not Milk.

1,500 words at 4

The growth rate of language usage increases by leaps and bounds as each year goes by. At a year old you may expect your child to have only two to three words in his or her speaking vocabulary. At two years old 300, at three years old 900 and at four years old 1,500. This growth pattern will continue until around the age of six. You as a parent can have a tremendous influence on the number of meaningful words your child will use at any given age.

According to noted speech scientist, Robert West, we need four things if our speech is going

to have a chance to develop normally: Phonatory mechanism (a larynx—vocal cords), articulatory mechanism (tongue, teeth, lips, soft palate), auditory mechanism (ears) and a linguistic mechanism (parts of the brain to process language). And our little babies make it all seem so easy. Little do we know how his or her endocrine gland, pituitary gland, thyroid gland, among a host of other bodily mechanisms, are influencing the speech apparatus.

A speech check list

If your child shows signs of having a speech problem, it is a very good idea to have a discussion with your family physician and explore the possibility of consulting with a certified speech and language pathologist for guidance and even remediation. The following can be classified as a speech problem:

- Attention is placed on how something is said and not what is said.
- The speech is interfering in his or her social adjustment.
- The child is self-conscious about his or her speech.
- The intelligibility of what is being said is poor.
- Your child is vocally unpleasant.
- Sounds are distorted, substituted and/or omitted.
- The rate of speech is too fast or slow, or the stress and pitch factors are not within limits of acceptability.
- Your child has linguistic errors.
- Your child's speaking voice is not appropriate to his or her age, sex or physical development.
- Your child's speech is visibly unpleasant.

According to an early 1950s American Speech and Hearing Association's committee report on the Midcentury White House Conference on Children and Youth, "A minimum of two million



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children, constituting 5 percent of the school age population, have severe defects of speech...and an additional 5 percent of the school age population have relatively minor speech defects." Thirty years later, I personally find the report data to be true as I screen for speech problems in schools across the New York Metropolitan area.

Keep up the good words

God bless the boy or girl who has a gift to gab. As parents we are role models and become respon-

sible for teaching sounds, words, the style of language and how to use communication systems to enhance one's knowledge and involvement in the surrounding World.

If you have questions about your child's communication skills or lack thereof and need assistance, contact your state, county or city speech, language and hearing association, or write to: The American Speech, Language, Hearing Association, 10801 Rockville Pike, Rockville, Maryland 20852.