

Is My Baby Trying to Talk to Me?

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My husband and I had to have a serious discussion recently because he insisted that our twelve month old is not saying “book”. I was appalled at his underestimation of her abilities! When she sees a book, she says “buh”, when she wants a book, she says “buh”. She uses “buh” consistently and in various contexts to mean “book”.

But I guess I can see why he is confused. Madeleine has been saying “buh” since she was probably four months old. In fact she said it so much, we began calling her “Baby Buh-Buh”. And at that point, I was certainly not stubbornly insisting that she was saying “book”.

Something changed, and I will tell you what it was.

The difference between babbling and talking hinges on intent and meaning. To better understand, you first need to know the definition of a word. A word is a meaningful unit of language, and children who use words are using them intentionally with the purpose of communicating. And as you can probably infer, a word is a word even if it is mispronounced. A child who says “wabbit” for “rabbit” has the word “rabbit” in their vocabulary. It is a speech problem, not a language problem. (Also, it is essential to understand that “errors” in pronunciation are sometimes [age appropriate](#). I do not expect a twelve month old to say final consonants in words or to be able to make the sound /k/).

I am frequently asked if babies are trying to communicate happiness when they smile, or are they trying to wave “hi” when they move their arms, or are they trying to say a word when they babble. The answer is that they are probably not trying to communicate at first, but after a while smiling, waving, and vocalizing become intentional.

And, importantly, their communication development hinges on how you react to them. Perhaps you are bouncing your infant and he smiles because it feels good. He is not necessarily trying to communicate his happiness to you, but because you are an adult and understand that a smile means happiness, you continue to bounce him. Your baby will start to learn that his smile lets you know that he likes something. Likewise, your child may be going through the “banging” phase, and one time he waves his arm up and down with the intention of banging on something, but in context it looks like he is saying “hi”. If you treat it like “hi” by waving back to him and saying “hi”, it will become “hi”. And finally, if you have a Baby Buh-Buh like mine, and she keeps saying “buh” when she is grabbing a book, if you say, “Yes, it is a book!” she will begin to understand that her vocalizations can be meaningful.

Parents help their children develop meaning by encouraging their progression through three developmental phases, academically referred to as the perlocutionary, illocutionary and locutionary periods:

Perlocutionary (0-8 months): Caregivers attribute intent to a child's actions.

Illocutionary (8-12 months): Children intentionally request, refuse and comment through gestures and vocalizations.

Locutionary (12-18 months): Children intentionally communicate using words.

So, for those of you who have skeptical significant others like mine, significant others who do not give their babies adequate credit for their impressive forays into the land of the speaking, please explain to them the definition of a word and how meaning develops. You can even throw in some of the fancy vocabulary for good measure. And remember, treat your baby's vocalizations as if they are meaningful and your baby will begin to understand the power of speech.

This post by Teresa was originally published [here](#).