Child-Directed Speech Dictionary

What is the practice?

Speaking parentese is a way of engaging in conversations with an infant that will have the child attentively looking at, smiling, and talking back to you. Talking to an infant in short, repetitive sentences while varying the pitch of your voice and making funny facial expressions is about all it will take to get your little ones to learn the joys of talking, interacting with, and having fun with interesting people. Parentese works best when it is used along with normal adult speech.

What does the practice look like?

Imagine a child lying on her back on a blanket on the floor and her mother leaning over her. The mother starts a conversation by saying, “Helloooo, my sweeeetie. How is my baaaabeee today?” She says this while smiling at her daughter, making exaggerated facial movements, and moving closer and closer to her baby’s face. “You are sooo cuuute,” Mom coos. “Are you Mama’s biiiig giirrl?” Encouraging parents to use parentese with their infants is one way to increase and improve communication between baby and parent.

How do you do the practice?

Here is a list of some, but certainly not all, of the words and sayings that are often used as part of speaking parentese. Search the Web using parentese or motherese for other examples of “baby talk.”

Baba (bottle)
Beddy-bye (go to sleep)
Blankie (blanket)
Boo-boo (bruise or hurt)
Cutie (cute)
Din-din (dinner)
Doo-doo (feces)
Go bye-bye (leave or go somewhere)
Hiney (buttocks)
Icky (disgusting)
Itty-bitty (little or small)
Jammies (pajamas)
Kissy (kiss)
Nappy (take a nap)
Pee-pee (urinate)
Poopy (soiled diaper)
Sippie (baby cup)
Stinky (smelly)
Tee-tee (urinate)
Tummy (stomach)
Uppie (pick up)
Yucky (disgusting)
Yum-yum (eat or meal time)

How do you know the practice worked?

- Does the child look intently at you when you speak parentese?
- Does she smile, laugh, and vocalize when you are talking to her?
- Have you increased your use of parentese in addition to standard adult speech?
Mommy-Daughter Chat

Five-month-old Samantha loves it when her mother talks to her. Her home visitor, Esme, suggests that a good position for Samantha is facing and looking directly at her mom while seated on mom’s lap or knees. In this position they can see and hear each other clearly with good eye contact. Mom starts a conversation by asking Sam in a sing-song voice, “How was your day? Did you do fun things?” Sam immediately starts smiling and laughing while looking intently at her mother. Mom responds by saying, “You like it soooo much when Mama talks to you! You are my favorite little girl. You are sooo cuuute, You’re Mama’s sweetie baaabeee!” Sam coos and babbles as Mom continues the conversation by talking to her daughter and mixing baby talk into the story.

Game of “Touch”

Eight-month-old Andrew and his caregiver, Ava, play a game of “Touch” where her talking parentese excites Andrew every time she changes his diaper. “Where are Andy’s piggies? Where are Andy’s piggies?” Ava asks. Andy starts kicking his legs in anticipation of having his feet tickled. Ava continues by asking, “Does Andy want a kissy? Does he want a kissy on his tumtum?” The more she talks to him, the more Andrew seems to know that Ava is going to kiss his stomach and blow raspberries on his tummy. Every so often, she uses more exaggerated and expressive baby talk to encourage Andrew’s initiating or getting her to continue to play the game.

Parentese

Nine-month-old Lauren’s visual difficulties make it very important for her to listen closely to everything in her environment. Her early interventionist, Vincent, has encouraged Lauren’s parents to make her auditory environment as stimulating as possible by talking to her about everything that goes on. Each parent has developed their own way of using baby talk with Lauren based on her responses. Her father uses do-do, icky, pee-you, poo-poo and other parentese each time he changes Lauren’s diaper. The fun, exaggerated style of talking encourages Lauren to smile, laugh, and talk back to her dad. Mom has her collection of parentese for Lauren’s mealtimes. Lauren especially likes it when her mother asks, “Do you want din-din or your sippy?” She has learned that reaching for either will have Mom feed her or give her a drink.