



The Most Beautiful Sound In The World: THE VOICE

Last night Miriam had a dream. She dreamt she went for a walk with her little daughter Leonie in the buggy and Leonie said: "Mama, could you please buy me an ice cream? One with strawberries?" When this happens, Leonie is only four weeks old! What a silly dream, Miriam thinks as she goes to Leonie's little bed and bends over her. "Mummy's sweet li-i-ttle baybee wanted to have some strawberry ice cream?" says Miriam – and suddenly asks herself: Why am I actually speaking to my child like this? She is only four weeks old and doesn't understand anything anyway! She will learn language much later!

Leonie obviously doesn't yet know what strawberry ice cream is. But she already understands something very decisive: My mother is coming, that is the voice I am most familiar with. When I hear this voice I feel safe and get enough to eat. Babies love the sound of human voices and can already distinguish the voice of their mother or father from other voices at an early age. After all, she could already hear long before the birth! When Miriam was in her fifth month of pregnancy, Leonie's hearing was already developed. And like all small children in the world, Leonie is also especially interested in the sound of voices: Is mama speaking in a friendly and gentle way with me – or does her voice sound annoyed and angry? Leonie can already distinguish differences like that in the tone of voice now. She can't lift her head yet to see what's going on around her – but listening, she can do that! She hears everything the adults in the room also hear, but as melody, as tonal backdrop. That is why it is so important for her that adults turn to her with their voices. Miriam already noticed that too: If she sings a song to Leonie or hums, her daughter falls asleep better than if she winds up the music box her sister-in-law gave her for Leonie's birth.

Parents babble along

Since Leonie's birth, Miriam often wonders about herself. How she suddenly talks! Her voice sounds different when she speaks with Leonie. She often talks in a higher pitch than usual. She stretches the words and plays games with the syllables, which actually do not say anything, such as *you-you-you* or *ay-ay*. And she often says things like "*You sweet little baby, what do you have on your leg, you little cutie pie!*" Isn't that silly? No! Infants not only need their parents' physical attention, but also the love expressed in their speech. Miriam's friend Leyla once put it this way: "One must caress children with words!" In Turkish, there is the proverb of the sweet tongue, "tatlı dillilik": "Sweet words will even lure a snake from its nest. Children need sweet tongues, they need to be caressed through words."

Almost all parents have a sense of how to do that and automatically give their babies exactly what they need to develop their language: They speak lovingly with them while tickling and cuddling them until they start making sounds. They imitate the baby's sounds, so to speak responding to it by translating the sounds into words: "Well, look who is crying so much, are you hungry?" Miriam enjoys seeing how Leonie reacts to her words, to her linguistic caresses: with looks, with small grunting sounds, by relaxing her muscles, which were previously perhaps tense from flatulence. She actually thinks it's almost a little talk: I say something, she reacts, then I say something to that... and at some point she will ask me for strawberry ice cream!

Baby's first language: syllables

In a few weeks, Leonie will already begin to coo and babble. She will try out her muscles in her mouth, throat and larynx; those are so to speak her first vocal exercises. When she is about three months old, she will be able to control her vocal muscles a bit better and start to "chat": By emitting her own sounds, she calls attention to herself and is seeking contact with her parents. Most babies produce their first syllables when they are about half a year old, strings like *da-da-da* or *ba-ba-ba*, sometimes loudly, sometimes quietly, sometimes higher, sometimes lower: It almost sounds like its own language. Then the toddlers continue to "work" on these syllables for months; Leonie will also increasingly find more of these syllables and change them until around her first birthday she will utter her first real word: "*papa*," "*mama*," or even "*coors*" (for cars) or "*ba ba*" for "bottle." Miriam asks herself what Leonie's first word will be – and when she will say it?

A big step: the first words

For all children, their first words are a giant step. Because they now notice all the things words can accomplish. How powerful words are, the force they have! If I say "*ba ba*," mama gives me the "bottle," isn't that great? With a single word, the child has practically stated an entire sentence: Mama, could you please give me the bottle? That is also why these utterances are called "one-word sentences." Of course, children apparently initially pronounce many words incorrectly. And for children, the words also often do not mean the same thing they mean for adults: for a child, "*coors*" can for a while mean everything that can drive, in other words a motorcycle or a dredger too. It can even mean "drive" in general: "We are driving," "I want to go by car"...

At fifteen months, Anja's daughter, little Josephine, simply started chattering away. It sounded crazy. Anja and her husband Kai initially understood almost nothing. But for Josephine the main thing was clearly that she spoke at all – regardless of how! There are a lot of children who learn to speak this way. Others, on the other hand, do it like Josephine's twin brother Paul: After their first words, they take a break, listen very carefully and in silence learn a lot of new words. Many children even do not speak for a while.



Fast starters, late bloomers: children develop differently

Miriam's work colleague Anja has twins who are now three years old. In the twins Miriam could see how differently children develop. Little Josephine with the playful curls already spoke her first word at nine months. But her brother Paul, a quiet child with gentle eyes, made his parents wait a whole two years for that! Anja even took him to the doctor because she was worried, but the doctor reassured her: In some cases it can simply take longer for a child to utter its first word. Sometimes children are simply too busy with something else: They are, for example, in the process of learning to walk – and are thus taking a break from their linguistic development. But the doctor still checked if Paul hears well – because if children cannot hear properly, then they also cannot develop their speech normally.

At one and a half years of age, most children (80 percent of boys and 90 percent of girls) can say at least three words other than "mama" and "papa." For Paul, it just took a bit longer – which made it all the more beautiful when he finally said "*feen*" (Josephine)! But Anja is still on the lookout.

"Paul understands a lot, but he doesn't speak," said Anja at the time and started worrying again – until her little son suddenly surprised her with a lot of new words he had absorbed during the "break."

Regardless of which path the child selects: adults help the child best by reacting to the utterances in a friendly way, by listening attentively and in passing naming the surrounding things ("look, that's a fork, you can prick yourself with that, ouch!"). The children first learn correct pronunciation and the exact meanings of the words in the course of time. If a child cries "*coors*!" and points to a motorcycle, the mother can, for example, say: "Yes, my dear, that is a great motorcycle!" She does not have to say: "No, that is not a car," because the child would not like to be braked in his/her joy of language. The child is proud of what he/she can already say!

Little songs, rhymes and counting rhymes are really fun for little children ("An apple a day keeps the doctor away"). And picture books are really exciting for them: to flip through the thick pages and see what's coming next – and what is that called? How practical that the horse in the picture can't simply gallop away, but stays there and can be looked at and called a horse over and over again until the word is firmly remembered. Looking at picture books or photo albums together and talking about them, telling stories, asking questions – that all helps children use language more and more confidently.

“Ba ba bed!”: from words to sentences

By their second birthday children learn about 50 words. Then a new phase begins which is equally exciting: The children start combining the words with one another. “Dada away,” little Josephine suddenly said and meant: Papa has driven to work. And Paul also starts making more and more of those “two-word sentences”: “Mummy coors” – mama should get in the car; “ba ba bed” – the bottle lies in bed; “Paul Baba” – Paul would like to have his stuffed animal Baba. The two also start asking questions: “Dada?” they asked to find out where Papa was. “T-at a bi-kit” (Is that a biscuit?) to make sure the brown slice on the plate was sweet. Today, at age three, Josephine and Paul speak about equally well, even if Josephine is still the more lively and talkative one.

Learning new words and playing with them is incredibly fun for children. Between ages two and three, their vocabulary really “explodes.” They also learn to make sentences with three and more words (“Benni also eat,” “Zeynep also still stays”), and they even invent words for things they cannot name yet (“upball” for “basketball”).

The words can now also be understood more easily,



because they always pronounce the sounds more and more clearly; but there are sounds that are particularly hard to pronounce: the sibilant sounds for example (s, sh, z, zh, x), certain consonants (d, g, k, l, r, t) and some sound combinations

(sp, skr, tr). It takes many children until they are of kindergarten age before they can pronounce these sounds correctly. We then hear “stwing” instead of “string.”

Three-year-olds bombard their parents with questions

Josephine and Paul recently started going to kindergarten. They now bring completely new words home with them: “morning circle,” for example, a word their parents do not at all use – that is the round the teacher organizes every day after they have had breakfast together and where each child is supposed to recount something. Paul is more reserved there and Josephine just chatters away, but both are practising something important: letting others talk; that one listens to them; that not everyone can just simultaneously talk, but one after another.

The daycare centre offers children many opportunities for linguistic development: It is a place with toys that are different from home, new friends, new tasks, the teachers know songs and rhymes which the parents have never before heard – the children slowly discover their own world, with their eyes, feet and fingers, but also with language. In any case, Josephine and Paul have started constantly asking questions: What is that, what is it called, how does that work, why is that so? Sometimes their parents are really annoyed by it. But they try to answer the questions as patiently as possible, because they know: Asking questions and getting answers is as important for the mind as eating is for the body. If children only get curt, short or no answers to their questions, they cannot joyfully discover their world through language. But if they experience friendly attention and hear answers that make sense then they realize: Being able to speak properly is worth it!

A lot of children whose parents speak different languages also attend Josephine and Paul’s daycare centre. The teachers attach a lot of importance to helping the kids’ German with fairy tales, songs, picture books and linguistic games while giving them the feeling that their native language is also beautiful, important and an enrichment for everyone.

As much as possible they accompany what they or the children are doing, with language: “Please fetch that soft toy which is sitting on the green bench,” they, for example, say – so the children immediately

learn that “on” means something other than “under” and that “green” does not look like “brown.” “Fetch that thing there” also would have sufficed – but the child would have learned a lot less!

Which language for my child?

Miriam takes Leonie out of her little bed and carefully places her on her shoulder so the child can see what is going on in the room: “We are getting visitors, my sweetie,” she says, although Leonie cannot yet understand that. “Elena and Dimitri are coming!” Her friend Elena grew up in Greece, but has already lived in Germany for a long time. Three-year-old Dimitri was born here. The two are barely in the living room and Dimitri starts talking away, in Greek and German. Elena always answers him in Greek. Why actually, asks Miriam? Couldn’t you speak German with him?

Of course, says Elena. But that would feel odd to her. Because all the little terms of endearment, the words like “sweetie” and “little mouse,” the children’s songs, the rhymes – she does not know them in German, and if she does, then they do not sound real, but in some way put on.

They simply come out in Greek! But sometimes Elena admits that she asks herself if it would be better to speak German with Dimitri so that he will do better later in school. Miriam agrees: Dimitri can also learn Greek on holiday or in Greek afternoon school. But German, that is the language that matters here!

Miriam is right – and again not right. Of course, it is very important for Dimitri's future that he learns German well. But even more important: Children need parents who enjoy speaking with them a lot, who themselves feel good speaking, who can speak with them in a fluent, varied way and with natural intonation. In Elena's case, it is clear: Greek is the language of her heart, the language in which she dreams, sings, curses and jokes. And her heart, that should be very wide open for Dimitri. She does not want to consciously switch each time before speaking with her child. Her husband Christos sees it exactly the same way: That is why they decided on Greek as the family language from the beginning.

So that Dimitri learns German, they often let him play with German children. He already heard and spoke his first words of German on the playground. But, in particular, Elena and Christos put their son in kindergarten as early as possible – from their third birthday, every child in Germany has the right to a place in a daycare centre. Elena and Christos can be assured: every child is in the position to learn a second language almost perfectly, that is if the child spends enough time with this language – and if the child's parents and surroundings give the child the feeling that this second language is also important and beautiful. It generally only takes one year at a daycare centre for children to be able to communicate in the second language.

One, two, three languages – children can do it

The native language as family language? Elena, Christos and Dimitri will live very well with that. Their neighbour Svetlana made a different decision: Her two-year-old son Victor should only grow up with the German language. Svetlana already came to Germany as a child and speaks the language very well. Her husband is German. She speaks German with him anyway – why should she now speak Russian with Victor? That would feel like a secret language to her, which Victor's father does not understand. Sometimes Svetlana has to defend her decision. Her Russian friend Natascha really scolds her when she visits: "At this age, Victor could so easily learn both languages, why don't you give him this chance?"

Natascha then cites her own son Alexej as an example, who is actually growing up trilingual. With his father from whom she is separated, he speaks Turkish, with her Russian, and at the daycare centre he learned German without any difficulty. He is already in fourth grade now and even does better in school than many of his German classmates! Heeding the advice of a teacher-friend, she and her ex-husband made sure that they each only spoke one language with Alexej, so that it was clear to the child: "Mama – Russian", "Papa – Turkish". That is better for children than if each parent sometimes speaks one language, sometimes the other. And, in Natascha's opinion, it also worked brilliantly for Alexej.

Obviously his Turkish is not very good, since he does not see his father much, and writing in Russian is hard for him. But nevertheless isn't it an invaluable advantage to be able to communicate in so many languages?

It definitely is. Speaking more than one language is a great asset, and at no point in time does a person learn a language more easily than in childhood. It is not too much to expect for a child to grow up bilingual or trilingual – in many parts of the world it is even normal for people to confidently circulate in several languages. Children like Dimitri and Alexej have an opportunity many German parents envy: They actually have fun learning several languages. Regardless of which native language their parents speak, even if it is only spoken by a few people and does not seem as useful as English: Growing up with more than one language strengthens the speech centre in a child's brain – and that often makes it easier for them to learn more foreign languages.

So is Svetlana making a mistake by only raising her son in German? No, because each family has to find the solution that works for them, which they feel best about. That is just as correct as Elena and Christos' decision and as Natascha's too: What is important in general is that the family enjoys talking and with a lot of variety and that it also listens carefully – be it German, Greek, Turkish or any other language.


What you can do to help your child

You learn to talk by talking! The most important thing is that you are connecting with your child, that you are "in dialogue":

- *Pay attention to your child's comments, listen to your child, repeat what your child says and give the child new material: Child: "Papa, fot!" Mother: "Yes, exactly, dear, Papa took the pot, water will now be put in it, we are cooking noodles".*
- *When you correct your child, then do it more in passing, (instead of "torcycle" offer the child the right word: "Yes, a motorcycle. That here is a motorcycle and has two wheels") and not in a way that hampers the child's fun in speaking, the child's word flow.*
- *Answer your child's questions as patiently and with as much understanding as possible*
- *Sing songs to your child, tell your child stories, peruse picture books together with your child*
- *Go regularly to preventative checkups and have your child's hearing checked if you think your child is starting the language acquisition process too slowly.*
- *If you are worried about your child's speech development, speak to your doctor. Doctors can provide an explanation and, if necessary, arrange speech therapy with a speech therapist.*

More information about speech development and multilingualism can be found on the following websites:

www.dbl-ev.de (Deutscher Bundesverband für Logopädie)
www.zweisprachigkeit.net
www.cplol.eu/eng/posters.htm

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