

How play impacts language learning in toddlers

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Dr Sara Quinn of the ANU Research School of Psychology. Credit: Stuart Hay, ANU

A new study from The Australian National University (ANU) has found that symbolic play in toddlers, which involves use of the imagination, is more beneficial to language development than functional play like puzzles, blocks or drawing.

The study of 54 infants tracked early language development in relation to the style of play toddlers engaged in with their parents.

Lead researcher Dr Sara Quinn of the ANU Research School of Psychology said the key difference came down to the way parents interacted with their kids.

"Symbolic play involves imagination, like pretending a banana is a telephone," Dr Quinn said.

"We noticed during this type of play parents asked the children more questions, they also shared attention more often and for longer durations.

"What was really interesting was that not only did parents ask more questions of their children, but they actually ended up in conversations more frequently.

"Over time that the conversational nature of symbolic play proved to be predictive of more advanced language growth."

The study also observed functional play, which involves the repetitive use of objects - like throwing a ball or stacking blocks. This type of play did not show the same benefits.

"I found some really distinct differences in the way parents and children use language in different types of play," she said.

"In functional play, we noticed parents used language that directed their child's behaviour, such as telling them to go and get something, or what an object is.

"Our analysis showed that functional play did not predict higher levels of [language](#) learning."

Dr Quinn said that one of the encouraging points to take from the study was that [parents](#) didn't need to buy any expensive technology to see the benefits.

"This type of play is so important, and it doesn't require any level of technology. It can be as simple as playing with the pots and pans in the bottom draw."

Provided by Australian National University

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