

Who's a preeety baaabee?

Think of the last time you met a baby in the company of an adult. Chances are your conversation went something like this:

To baby, in high-pitched voice:

*"Hellooo, sweeeetie. How's my baaabee?
Ooooh, you're sooo cute. You are
Sooooo cuuuuute!"*

To adult, groaning:

*"What a day. It took me 15 minutes to get on
the freeway, then another half-hour to make it to
work. I was late to the morning meeting again."*

To baby, high-pitched:

*"Can you give me a smiile?
Give me a big, big smiile!"*

It's a phenomenon that even the most serious-minded parents can't explain. They see a baby and they start talking in silly voices.

Researchers call the special way we talk to babies "motherese," or "parentese". This sing-song speech, often accompanied by exaggerated facial expressions, seems to be used by nearly everyone who talks to a baby (Gopnik, Meltzoff & Kuhl, 1999; Grieser & Kuhl, 1998; Snow, 1977). We all love to do it—mothers, fathers, grandparents, friends, even preschoolers addressing younger brothers and sisters. And what's more, babies seem to like it too.



How do we know infants like it?

Researchers have found that infants prefer to hear parentese to adult conversation (Fernald, 1985). To test this, scientists sat babies in their mother's laps and let them choose to hear tapes of adult-to-adult speech or adult-to-infant speech (parentese). When babies turned their heads one way, an eight-second tape of adult conversation played. When they turned their heads the other way, the babies heard parentese. The researchers found that the babies consistently chose to turn their heads to hear the speech directed toward infants (Fernald, 1985). Amazingly, further testing showed this to be true even when the speaker spoke in a foreign language (Gopnik et al., 1999). Babies, quite simply, enjoy hearing the higher-pitched sounds and exaggerated speech patterns of parentese. Babies not only enjoy the sounds we make when we do it, they also enjoy watching our faces as we talk to them.

In fact, researchers have found that babies as young as five months old are capable of some simple lip-reading. In this test, babies were first shown a silent video of a face forming the sounds "ahhh" or "eeee" and then they heard audiotapes of one of the sounds. The babies knew which face matched which sound. Babies hearing the "ahhh" sound looked at the video with the wide-open mouth, while those that heard "eeee" looked at the video with the grinning mouth (Kuhl & Meltzoff 1982; Gopnik, et al., 1999).

Talking to Baby

The magical sounds of "parentese" make it the preferred language for babies



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Does parentese help infants

Does parentese serve a purpose beyond making everyone feel warm and happy? Could sing-song speech, silly faces and short, simple sentences of baby talk help infants learn language? Researchers are just beginning to look at the possible benefits of parentese. In fact, one study found that parentese helps children acquire certain aspects of language (Thiessen, Hill & Saffron, 2005).

Our universal mother tongue

It's well established that most of us use it, regardless of our culture or native tongue (Kuhl, et al., 1997). Various studies have documented parentese in speakers of English, German, Russian and Swedish. One study found it among speakers of Mandarin Chinese, a tonal language in which, unlike English or German, a change in the pitch of a word alters the meaning of that word (Greiser & Kuhl, 1988).

But in every language, parentese seems to share several characteristics and scientists theorize that it has several purposes.

Parentese is higher-pitched, sometimes as much as an octave higher. Why do we all seem to become sopranos when we talk to babies? It may help to get their attention. After all, if we're getting high and squeaky, we're probably not addressing anybody with more authority, or even more height, than we have.

Parentese uses short and simple sentences, often repeated over and over again. We've all said it, probably multiple times, "Who's a sweet baby? Are you a sweet baby? Yes, you're a sweet, sweet baby." Repeating ourselves may help babies figure out words, and simple, repeated sentences may help them with grammar.

Parentese features well-formed, elongated consonants and vowels. We tend to pronounce words precisely when we talk to babies – pulling out the vowel sounds and clearly voicing consonants – in marked contrast to the hurried way we speak to other adults. A slurred "sweebabe" becomes a bright "sweeet baaabee" when spoken to someone who truly fits the description. Hearing the exaggerated sounds of parentese may make it easier for infants to learn the sounds of their own language. Research in this area provides the clearest indication so far that babies use parentese to help solve the mystery of language (Gopnik, et al., 1999).



Babies learn words with parentese!

And don't be embarrassed about it for a second. Around the world, adults love to use parentese. Babies love to hear parentese. It's delightful to move in close to a child and communicate in a warm, friendly way that's sure to get a smile. And the slow, higher-pitched, sing-song speech may be just what an infant needs to hear to help her figure out how language is put together.

Helpful parenting tips

- ★ Talk to your baby as you go through the day. Even if young children don't understand what your words mean, they love to hear the sounds of language. And don't be shy about smiling and making goo-goo eyes while you talk!
- ★ Move in close when talking to your child, so that your baby can see your face and your lips move when you talk.
- ★ Draw out your vowels and pitch your voice as high as you like.
- ★ Smile and make eye contact.
- ★ Praise his pretty brown eyes. Tell her she's a sweetie.



For more information on parenting and early learning, or to order copies of this Spotlight, visit www.ParentingCounts.org.

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