

Language & Learning

Building Concepts

How Can I Stretch My Ideas?

Encouraging a baby's language development is a lot like pulling taffy. Taffy becomes better formed when it is stretched and pulled. This is true of language, too. You can accept your baby's idea, and then stretch the idea just a little. When you add a concept word, you are giving your baby a chance to see an idea used in a more advanced way. That encourages your baby to stretch up to the next step. The important point is to stretch just a little, so that your baby still recognizes the original idea. You do this by adding just one idea or putting the child's thought into a slightly longer phrase. It works like this:

Baby: "Ball!"

Parent: "Yes. A big ball!"

Babies usually mean more than they say. "Ball!" might mean "Big ball!" if the ball is bigger than usual. "Ball!" might also mean "Roll me the ball!" You can say, with your eyebrows up and your pitch rising, "Roll the ball?" Ball could mean, "The ball rolled under the couch and I can't reach it." You can say, as you move the couch or reach under to retrieve it, "You lost the ball. Here it is!" Your baby will usually let you know what "Ball!" means by adding gestures and facial expressions.

Sometimes it is your baby who uses the concept word. "Wet," can be a diaper, clothes out of the washer, the floor after it is mopped, the high chair tray with spilled milk or hair after it is washed. That is your opportunity to stretch the taffy with all those labels you learned: "Wet diaper." "Yes, wet clothes." "Wet floor." "Yuck! Wet tray." "Wet hair."

You are still responding to your baby's lead, but stretching the baby's idea adds to the concept.