You can talk whilst you are doing your work

Give your baby a commentary on your daily activities. You can talk to him even if he is on your back.

- While you are preparing food, talk about the food and the kitchen tools you are using (but not while you are cooking - of course, it is not safe to let a baby be near the fire in case he gets burned).
- While you are washing plates and pots, talk about it. Use words like clean, dirty, full, empty, big, small, upside down and more.
- While you are sweeping the floor, or making mats or baskets, talk about what you are doing. Use words such as in, out, up, down, push, pull. This may be a time when you can sing to your baby.
- While you are working on your shamba, talk about what you are doing. You can name the crops you are growing, tell the baby how good the food will be to eat.
- When you are travelling, on foot or on the daladala you can talk about what you can see as you go along. Encourage your baby to smile at other people you meet and encourage them to talk to the baby.
- Include the baby as a full member of the family, so other family members greet him when they come home.

How should we respond when the baby makes sounds, even if those sounds are not in words?

- This is very, very important: when the baby makes sounds, copy those sounds back to him and smile!
- Do not try to make him say it again, or to say something different. Accept what he says and be happy that he is communicating with you.
- If he says babababa, for example, you can say “yes, here is Baba. Let us wave to Baba.” (Take the baby’s hand and wave it to his father).
- When babies use their first real words, they often point to the thing they are naming (Mama, or a cup or a toy, for example). Repeat the word and show the thing to the baby if possible.
- It is important not to correct the baby’s words. He cannot speak properly yet but he will learn in time. Just accept how he tries to say the words and repeat the correct way for him.
- Make sure he knows that you are pleased with him for trying to speak.
- Sometimes the baby will babble strings of syllables that have no meaning or just make little sounds in his mouth. Just copy the sounds back to him, while looking and smiling. Tell him how clever he is. You may have quite long ‘conversations’ of meaningless sounds with babies in the first year of life. This is all good and it helps them to learn how to speak.

"It does not matter what you say - just try it, and you will find it is really easy, and great fun!"

ZUMM gratefully acknowledges the support of:

Ministry of Education and Vocational Training
Ministry of health and Social Welfare
Ministry of Community Development, Gender and Children

Talking to our babies is a precious gift that all parents can give to their children and it costs nothing! Open this leaflet to find out more!

For more information/for more copies of this leaflet, contact:

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It is very important to talk to babies from the day they are born.

Why is it important to speak to young babies? They can’t speak to us!

- Babies can recognise their mother’s voice from a few days old (and the father’s voice too, if he talks to his new child).
- Babies are listening and learning from birth, even though they cannot use their learning until some months later.
- Babies learn very fast. Their brains are designed to learn a lot in a short time. Babies who are spoken to a lot will speak earlier and use more words.
- Children who speak early, speak well, use more different words, learn to read more easily and are more successful in school.
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BUT

- NEVER SPEAK HARSHLY TO YOUR BABY

We are a mother and a father. What should we do? What should we say to our baby?

- Look at your baby - look at him when he is looking at you
- Smile at your baby - and always smile when he smiles at you
- Play with him, tickle him, touch his hands or face
- Use words: soothe the baby by speaking “It’s OK, Daddy is here... don’t cry...there’s a good boy...”
- Use short sentences to your baby: “Here are your hands,” “Let us take your hat off,” “Up you come,” “What’s the matter?”
- Name the things in the environment, or parts of the baby’s body
- It is GOOD to repeat words and sentences - you do not have to think of something new to say!

BUT

- NEVER SPEAK HARSHLY TO YOUR BABY

“We started talking to the baby when she started talking to us. We did not know that it is too late.”

“We talk to our baby because we like to - we did not know it is important.”

You can talk while you are caring for your baby

But what can I say to the baby?

- Use words to soothe or comfort the baby if he is crying. Speak softly and slowly and use a kind, loving voice: “It’s OK. What’s the problem? Are you hungry? Look - there is Grandmother: Hello Grandmother!”
- Talk while holding or cuddling the baby and name some of the people or things he can see. Tell him how beautiful he is. Tell him you love him.
- Talk while feeding the baby (breastfeeding and later, also when feeding with a spoon). “Is that nice? You are hungry, aren’t you? Good food for a good baby. Nice porridge - here it comes. Mummy is putting some more on the spoon. Open your mouth...in it goes - very good food.”
- Talk while washing and dressing the baby. Talk about what you are doing, so the baby learns the names of things such as clothes and parts of the body. “Let us take your socks off - one sock, two socks. Oh, here are your feet and your toes!” “Shall we wash your hands? Your hands are dirty - wash one hand...wash the other hand. Nice clean hands now.”
- You do not have to use words - you can also make sounds, such as ma-ma-ma-ma or bub-bub-bub, or make funny noises using your lips. Babies find this funny - they will laugh and may try to copy you.
- You do not have to think of new things to say. It is good to repeat the same words, sentences or sounds three or four times - or as many times as you like. Babies learn words by hearing them over and over and then they start to try to say them.

“We started talking to the baby when she started talking to us. We did not know that it is too late.”

“We talk to our baby because we like to - we did not know it is important.”