

## Speech-Language Pathology Department



# HELPING YOUR CHILD Learn to Talk and Understand

11 ways to help young children  
build their language skills

### 1 Be face to face with your child

Get down to your child's physical level so they can see your face. Do this whenever you want them to pay attention to:

- Your facial expressions
- What you are saying
- You, while they are playing (even if it means lying on the floor!)

This shows your child that you are interested in what they are doing and communicating. It also lets them see how your mouth moves when you say words.

### 2 Repeat what your child says

When your child makes a sound or says a word, imitate it. This gets their attention and also encourages them to imitate you in the future.

To motivate them to repeat after you, you can also use many fun sounds or words. For example:

- When dropping a block in a pail, say "boom"
- Play hide and seek and say "boo"

Learning to imitate your sounds and words is an important building block in your child's language development. Following these strategies will help your child imitate you when they are ready.

**3****Do not force your child to repeat after you**

It is important not to force your child to repeat sounds, words or sentences after you. This can put pressure on them and make your child less willing to speak or engage. Instead:

- Use words often during a play session or interaction
- Pause to let them repeat if they want to

**TIP**

If your child repeats after you, or tries to, praise them to reinforce this behaviour.

**4****Balance questions and comments**

Instead of asking many questions, balance questions with comments. It is easier for your child to learn when you give information about what is happening instead of only asking questions.

When possible, turn your questions into comments. For example, instead of asking, "What are you eating?" say "You're eating an apple!"

**5****Talk about what you are doing or seeing**

During daily routines, talk about what you are doing or seeing, such as:

- Eating
- Taking a bath
- Looking at books
- Playing games

Describe what your child does and shows interest in. Use these words a couple of times and in different contexts. Repeating words often will help your child learn what the words mean as well as help them say the words once they are ready.

**6****Speak in short sentences with correct grammar**

Avoid skipping words when talking to your child (ex.: "Where hat?"). Instead, use short sentences but with proper grammar (ex.: "Where's your hat?").

**7****Add gestures to what you say**

Support your messages with gestures (hand and body signs) to help your child understand what you are saying. For example:

- Shake or nod your head
- Wave
- Point
- Clap
- Blow a kiss

When possible, hold up and show your child the item you are talking about (ex.: show the apple while saying "Mommy is going to eat the apple"). Children usually start using gestures at an early age and can communicate many messages this way (ex.: pointing to an object they want).

### TIP

Use gestures regularly and always say the related word at the same time.

Gestures are also easier for a child to copy than words. For example, if you always use the same gesture when showing your child an activity is finished, they may begin to use this same action to let

you know they want to stop a given activity (before they are ready to say the word).

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### Interpret your child's message

#### TIP

If your child makes a mistake when saying a word or sentence, repeat the words or sentences back to them with the proper sound or grammar. Do not force them to repeat after you.

Children can communicate with you by using a:

- Look
- Gesture
- Sound
- Word
- Sentence

Use context to interpret your child's message – sometimes, you will still

have to guess! For example, if your child points to their shoes while getting ready to go outside, you can say "Let's put your shoes on!" and then do so. Remember to keep sentences short and grammatically correct.

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### Create situations for your child to ask for things

Here are a few examples of things you can do to encourage your child to make requests:

#### Put toys that your child wants out of reach.



- During play, give them all they need except for one item.
- You can give them a wrong item on purpose.

#### Wait for your child to ask for an object before giving it to them.



- In daily activities, give your child 2 choices  
For example, at breakfast, offer orange juice and milk and let them choose.

#### Create situations where your child needs your help.



- Blow bubbles and then close the lid tightly and hand the jar to your child.
- Use bins or transparent boxes to put away toys so that your child will be tempted to make a request.

Remember, your child can request with a gesture, sound, or word.

## 10 Add to what your child says

If your child uses short phrases while looking at a book or in a daily activity, add a few words (1 or 2). For example:

- If they say “*cat*”, you can say “*A big cat!*”
- If they say “*Daddy gone*”, you can say “*Daddy is gone*”

Make sure to include verbs, adjectives (ex.: big, small, red, long, etc.), and prepositions (ex.: of, under, on, in).



## 11 Look at books with your child

Read a storybook in your own words:

- Take the time to speak about the images on the page
- Comment on your child's interests
- When your child points to an image, name it and talk about it using short sentences with good grammar
- Allow your child to be involved in any way possible (ex.: turn the pages, take turns pointing at pictures, holding the book, etc.)

If possible, include books in your daily routine with your child!

For more information, please visit:

[www.thechildren.com](http://www.thechildren.com)

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