

TIPS TO **ENCOURAGE**

Expressive Language





Tips and Tricks to Encourage Expressive Language Parent Handout

Children with special needs often struggle to express themselves verbally, not because they have nothing to say, on the contrary but rather because talking is difficult for them. Despite this, recent research has shown that early diagnosis and treatment can greatly improve the use of language and speech in these children, in fact the earlier we intervene the better. If you are concerned that your child is delayed compared to other children their age you should seek advice from your pediatrician and request a referral to see a speech and language therapist. But you may also be asking, “What can I do now to help my child communicate and to talk?”

For parents and care providers who struggle to communicate with their child and who are concerned that their children are late talkers, the following tips have been developed over decades of real-world use to help children improve their communication skills, play skills and attention. As with so many things, diligence and the consistent application of these tips will determine their effectiveness in helping your child speak with you, and others, more effectively.

- Reinforce communication attempts that your child makes by maintaining eye contact, responding with speech, and imitating vocalizations using different patterns and emphasis. For example, raise the pitch of your voice to indicate a question (e.g., Child: “Cookie!” Adult: “Cookie? Want cookie?”).
- Talk as you bathe, feed, and dress your child. Talk about what you are doing, where you are going, what you will do when you arrive, the colors of objects and clothing, and who and what you see.
- Teach language during everyday activities (e.g., rolling up sleeves and washing hands can be used to label items and actions, thus teaching language such as arm, hand, fingers, shirt, sleeves, on, off, water, soap, etc.), or through play (e.g. placing a miniature man in a car and pushing the car can be used to teach car, in, drive, wheels, man, go, stop, etc.). Encourage your child to imitate what you’ve said. You can make every activity a language learning activity. Point to things, name them, sing a nursery rhyme, or ask a question. You don’t have to set aside a specific time of day to learn language. Every activity is a language learning activity.
- Abstract concepts can be taught using real objects (e.g., Adult: Box goes under the table. “Where did the box go?” Encourage your child to say, “Under”). Your child can also be directly involved in the game (e.g., Adult: “Sara, go behind the table. Where did Sara go?” Encourage your child to say, “Behind”). Bubbles can be used to teach the label



up and/or down (e.g., Adult: “Do you want bubbles up or down?” and encourage your child to make a gestural and/or verbal choice).

- Allow for opportunities when your child can have control of what happens in his or her environment. When your child wants to change an activity or an item he or she is eating or playing with, allow this to happen by asking him or her what he or she wants. Provide your child with two possible choices that are available and show the choices when asking (e.g., “Do you want to play at the sand table or the swings?” “Do you want to have milk or water?” “Do you want the green playdoh or the blue playdoh?” “Do you want the black shirt or the red shirt?”). Allow your child to point to the choice and encourage him or her to repeat the name of the item chosen.
- Be sure to pause regularly when you’re speaking to your child, to allow him or her to have the opportunity to talk and comment on what he or she is seeing or doing. This will also give your child time for him or her to think about what he or she wants to say.
- Use gestures paired with your words such as waving when saying “goodbye” or pointing up when saying “up” to help convey meaning.
- Once your child is using a new word at home, encourage him or her to use the word in other environments, such as at playgroup, or when visiting family and friends, or when shopping.
- Read to your child. Sometimes, “reading” is simply describing the pictures in a book without following the written words. Choose books that are sturdy and have large colorful pictures that are not too detailed. Ask your child, “What’s this?” and encourage your child to name what you point to.
- Speak clearly and slowly and face your child when speaking. Seeing the way that you form spoken words will help your child do the same.
- If your child says a word or sentence incorrectly, rather than correcting or asking your child to repeat it, just say the word/sentence back to him or her correctly to show you have understood. This way, your child always hears the correct version and will be more likely to use the correct version next time.
- Make time to sit down with your child every day, even if it is just for a few minutes a day, although the more one-to-one time the better. Spend some quiet time with your child, away from distractions. Look at a book together and talk about the pictures, or play with blocks, dolls, or other toys that your child enjoys.
- Let your child lead the play. Let him or her be the boss of play. Allowing your child to choose what he or she wants to do is the best way to ensure he or she will be interested



in the activity. Then, your child will be more likely to listen to what you are saying as you talk about actions you are doing and items you are playing with.

- Sing songs and nursery rhymes. The rhythm and rhyme that they contain will build skills that help with speech and literacy development. When your child becomes familiar with a song or nursery rhyme, pause at various times and allow your child to fill in the missing word (e.g., Adult: “Row, row, row your __”. Child: “boat” Adult: “...gently down the stream.”).
- Use games to motivate your child to make sounds. For instance, play the game – Ready... Steady... GO!! Blow up a balloon, hold it, then say, “Ready... Steady... GO”, and let the balloon go. Do this a few times and then pause after you say “ready... steady...” and see if your child steps in and says “GO”.
- Comment and expand on your child’s words and sentences, rather than asking him or her to repeat words. If your child says “car”, respond with “big car” or “yellow car” or “fast car.” When your child requests an item, repeat the request and add extra words to expand on the request (e.g., Child: “Water; “Adult: “Drink water”, then give your child water).
- Use fun sounds like animal sounds or environmental sounds like a car engine (e.g., “Beep, beep”), an airplane (e.g., “Vroom”), or a clock (e.g., “Tick tock”) that you can incorporate when playing games or looking at books. Encourage your child to imitate the sound and use it to build vocabulary by pairing it with a picture or object and labeling what goes with the sound (e.g., Show your child a toy dog, then say “Woof! Dog says, woof.”).
- You can tempt your child with something motivating to elicit some speech or a vocalization. For instance, holding onto the cookie tin, but not opening it until your child vocalizes a request, or holding the bubble wand out but waiting for a request before blowing bubbles. In the early stages your child does not have to use the correct words or sentences, but just vocalize or make an attempt of the word. Eventually, you can expect more accurate words to request, such as “cookie” or “blow.”

Therapies based on a “behavioral” model rely on the principles of behavior and attempt to teach child skills by providing specific cues and consequences for behavior in order to teach the child new skills. Therapies based on a “developmental” model focus on identifying a child’s current ability level and guiding him or her through a sequence of learning experiences that become more developmentally complex across time.

The above tips and tricks to encourage expressive language are derived from these therapies, as well as from direct experience working with special needs children around the world.



About the Author

Donia Fahim, Ph.D., Cert. MRCSLT (UK), is Specialist Speech and Language Therapist, International Educational Consultant, writer and adventure traveler who has devoted her life to improving the educational and therapeutic services of young children with special needs around the world. She has worked with leading experts in the field and utilizes evidence-based practices with in-depth knowledge across disciplines.

For more tips, and a deeper understanding of the challenges and treatments for children with autism, Dr. Paul's and Dr. Fahim's book, **Let's Talk: Navigating Communication Services and Supports for Your Young Child with Autism**, [is available at Amazon](#).