

B. Observe, Wait, and Listen

Letting the child lead begins with:



Observing

Waiting

Listening

Observing, waiting, and listening are the keys to encouraging children to communicate with you. They are very effective tools for opening the doors to interaction – even with the most reluctant communicators.

Observe

Observing means paying close attention to a child so you can see exactly what she's interested in or what she's trying to tell you.

As adults, we are more tuned in to sound than to nonverbal communication. Babies and children who make enough noise – by making sounds, saying words, or crying – will get our attention. But some children, especially those with reluctant or passive conversational styles, haven't figured out how to use their voices to get attention. Nor have they developed the confidence to use them. For these children, communication may be very subtle. If you take the time to observe, however, you'll be able to see what they're "saying."



Debbie was on the floor with Jerome, a very quiet 11-month-old. She tried to play with him, but felt she was getting nowhere – he just banged his blocks and made no sounds at all.

Observe closely, Debbie! After Jerome banged his blocks, he looked at you three times to see your reaction. That's communication!

Children with severe delays or limited motor abilities may have difficulty making sounds or moving their bodies. You must be a very keen observer to notice subtle movements or changes in body position or facial expression. These may indicate a child's interests or her attempts to get your attention. Observation Guide 2, in Chapter 2, will help you to recognize these subtle initiations, which are the beginnings of communication.



Karen is showing a picture book about animals to three-year-old Stephanie, a Discoverer with severe cerebral palsy. Stephanie seems to have a passive conversational style. She has very limited head movement and poor control of her arms for reaching or pointing. She also has difficulty making sounds. Since Stephanie can't point to the pictures or answer Karen's questions, Karen isn't sure if Stephanie is really interested in the book.

Observe closely, Karen! Stephanie's eyes widen and she smiles and extends her legs each time you show her that picture of a dog. She really is interested in the book. While you can't be sure why she likes that picture, you can show it to her more often – and find other pictures of dogs to see if she likes those too.

Stephanie, who has cerebral palsy, shows she is interested in the picture of the dog by smiling and extending her legs.

