



Hanen's Four Stages of Early Communication: A Short Guide for Parents

Every child's ability to communicate develops gradually over time. In *It Takes Two to Talk*®, the Hanen parent guidebook, we divide early communication and language development into four stages:

- **Discoverers** - react to how they feel and to what is happening around them, but have not yet developed the ability to communicate with a specific purpose in mind.
- **Communicators** - send specific messages directly to a person, without using words.
- **First Words Users** - use single words (or signs or pictures).
- **Combiners** - combine words into sentences of two or three words.

Children with communication difficulties progress through the same stages as other children, but more slowly. In some cases, children with significant delays may not get through all the stages.

As you read the descriptions of the four stages below, think about which one best describes how your child is currently communicating.

The Discoverer – establishing the foundations for communication

The Discoverer is in the earliest stage of learning to communicate. He does not yet know how to communicate deliberately (with a specific purpose in mind). He just reacts to how he is feeling and to what is happening around him, which we call responding “reflexively”.

► *How the Discoverer Expresses Himself*

In the beginning, crying is the best way a Discoverer has to let you know that he needs something, such as food, sleep or to be picked up. Over time, his cries change, and a “hungry cry” sounds different from a “tired cry.”

The Discoverer also communicates through facial expressions and body movements. He may turn away if he doesn't want something. If there's too much going on, he may close his eyes. Soon, the Discoverer learns to stop moving so that he can pay attention to new and interesting sights, sensations and sounds, including the sound of your voice. He is interested in others and expresses this interest by looking and smiling.

Later on, the Discoverer begins to explore his world more. He reaches for objects or people, or moves toward them. Sometimes, parents have to pay close attention to learn what a Discoverer is interested in.

The Discoverer begins to use his voice in different ways. The first sounds that he makes are sounds like “eee” and “aaah.” Later, these change to sounds like “coo” and “goo.” This is called cooing. Toward the end of this stage, the Discoverer puts together strings of sounds like “bah-bah-bah-bah.” This is called babbling.

The Discoverer also changes the loudness and tone of his voice. He may make happy sounds when you talk or sing to him. He also imitates some of the sounds you make, as well as some of your actions and facial expressions. The Discoverer looks, smiles, laughs and makes sounds to get and keep your attention.

Even at this early stage, the Discoverer takes a turn in what we might call a “conversation”. If an adult says something to him, he responds by looking, smiling, moving or making a sound, which the adult then responds to. These early back and forth interactions form the basis for future conversations.

► *What the Discoverer Understands*

The Discoverer doesn't yet understand words, but he's becoming more aware of the world around him. He is starting to recognize some faces, objects, voices and sounds. He turns his head toward some sounds and voices, especially Mom's or Dad's. He is easily startled by sudden changes, such as loud noises or fast movements.

The Discoverer smiles back at a face that is smiling at him. He watches your face when you talk to him. An older Discoverer stops moving when he hears you call his name and also starts to understand simple gestures. For example, when you hold your arms out, he may lift his arms to be picked up. Although the Discoverer doesn't yet understand your words, he responds to the tone of your voice and to familiar situations. Over time, he begins to anticipate what happens next in daily routines like meals or bath time. For example, when you're getting him ready for his bath and he hears the water running, he may squeal or kick his legs because he's looking forward to splashing in the tub. Because he can anticipate what's to come, the Discoverer also enjoys games like Peekaboo and Tickle.

The Communicator

From birth, when you respond to your child's messages, he gradually makes the exciting and powerful connection that what he does have an effect on those around him. He now understands that he can make things happen. For example, he realizes that when he holds his arms up, you pick him up, and when he makes a sound, you pay attention to him. Reaching this new understanding of the world is called making the communication connection. When your child makes the communication connection, he becomes a Communicator.

► *How the Communicator Expresses Himself*

The Communicator begins to send messages with a specific purpose in mind. Even though he isn't using words yet, he communicates with you directly by looking at you, making gestures (such as shaking his

head to say “no”) pointing and making sounds. At first, he communicates to protest or refuse something he doesn’t want. Soon he’ll let you know that he wants an object – a cracker, for instance – or that he wants you to do something, like take him out of his high chair.

Later on, the Communicator becomes more social in his communication, sharing his interests with you. He communicates to get your attention, to say hello or goodbye or to show you something. Often he’ll point to tell you about something. He may also make sounds in a questioning tone of voice to ask questions. As he gets better and better at communicating with you, he may even make up his own gestures. For example, if he rubs his face with the back of his hand, he may be communicating about his special blanket.

The Communicator may keep trying to get his message across until you respond the way he wants. For example, if he reaches and makes sounds to ask for a cracker and you hand him a cracker, he may become quiet. He may also smile to let you know that’s what he wants. But if he wants a cracker and you hand him a drink, he’ll let you know that’s not what he wants. He might appear quite frustrated, raising his voice. He may take your hand to show you exactly what he wants. Succeeding at making himself understood is an important part of his communication development.

An important part of a Communicator’s development happens when he learns to focus on a person and an object at the same time. Previously, he could focus on either you or an object, but not both together. At the Communicator stage, he looks at an object and points to it, and then he looks at you. Then he looks back and points to the object again, to make sure you know what he’s communicating about. This new skill makes it possible for him to show you things and let you know what he thinks about them. Called joint attention, this development is one of the most important steps on the way to using first words or signs.

Joint attention also allows the Communicator to learn to follow your focus. If you point to something, he can now look in that direction to see what you’re showing him. Now you can point out lots of interesting things – creating all kinds of opportunities for language learning.

The Communicator continues to make sounds, imitating your sounds more often. He starts to put sounds together and almost seems to be talking. But his “talking” is all sounds and no words. He may also make specific sounds that are his first deliberate attempts to use words and will start to use a few words as he moves into the next stage.

► *What the Communicator Understands*

As the Communicator experiences everyday activities, like getting dressed or going to bed, he hears you say certain words over and over again. In time he’ll begin to understand what they mean. He’ll let you know he understands by looking, pointing, showing or following your simple directions. This is an important part of language development because your child needs to understand a word before he can use it to communicate.

All the communication skills a Communicator develops form the foundation for learning to talk. The communication connection, the ability to be social and to use a combination of sounds, gestures and eye gaze to communicate lay the groundwork for lifelong communication. Once a child can establish joint attention, he has the tools to “talk” about things in the world and to listen to what others have to say; as such, the basics of conversation are established within the first 14 months of life.

The First Words User

First Words Users have started to talk – or use signs. They are now developing a vocabulary of single words to talk about the things that are important to them in their world.

► *How the First Words User Expresses Himself*

It's exciting when your child uses his first words. This is a moment parents wait for, especially if language has been slow to develop. The First Words User may imitate words that he hears you say, or he may begin to use words all by himself. He starts by saying one word at a time. Children who communicate by making one sign at a time or by pointing to one picture at a time are also First Words Users. These first words represent people, objects and actions that are familiar and important in your child's world, like mama, dada, juice, doggie, or up. Along with these words, he'll continue to use gestures, sounds and facial expressions. A First Words User may also use one word for many different things. Juice might refer to any drink. Doggie might refer to any animal with four legs and a tail.

The First Words User uses one word to express a whole message. If he points to a chair and says "Mama," he might mean either "That's Mommy's chair" or "Sit here, Mommy." You can figure out what he means by looking at the whole situation and tuning in to his actions, tone of voice, gestures and facial expressions.

Your child's first words may be simpler versions of real words, like nana for banana or teep for sleep. You'll learn what they mean because whenever he sees or experiences these things, he'll say the words the same way. It may be difficult to figure out what some of your child's early words mean. Once you figure them out, you may be the only person who recognizes them.

► *What the First Words User Understands*

The First Words User's understanding of words continues to grow during this stage. He can point to or show you familiar objects and people when you say their names. He also understands simple directions and phrases like "Get your cup" or "Time for your bath," especially if you use gestures with your words.

The Combiner

Combiners now combine words, making the leap from single words to two-word phrases.

► *How the Combiner Expresses Himself*

Often (but not always) by the time a child uses about 50 single words, signs or pictures, he's ready to begin putting them together in combinations like "More juice" or "Mommy up." These two-word combinations sometimes send a clear message, as in "Want teddy." However, you may need to look for clues to figure out exactly what a Combiner means.

At first the Combiner continues to use single words along with two-word combinations. He relies less and less on gestures, though, to get his message across. He learns to change his word combinations into questions by changing the tone of his voice. For instance, "Cookie all gone?" might mean "Are the cookies all gone?" He also begins to ask questions like "What that?" or "Where kitty?"

► *What the Combiner Understands*

The Combiner understands many simple instructions without the help of gestures. He can also identify an object not only by its name, but by what you do with it. For example, he can point to food when you ask, “Show me what you eat.” He understands simple questions that start with where, what and who. He is also beginning to understand words like in, on, under, big and little. He listens to short, simple stories and can point to familiar objects pictured in books.

Identifying Your Child's Stage of Communication Development

It Takes Two to Talk®, the Hanen guidebook for parents, has a checklist for parents to complete, titled “My Child’s Stage of Communication Development”, which includes both what the child understands and can express. When parents complete this checklist, they identify their child’s stage of communication development (Discoverer, Communicator, First Words User or Combiner) and have an opportunity to see what the next steps are.

It Takes Two to Talk® guides parents through strategies that help their child learn to communicate, stage by stage. Once you have identified your child’s stage, look for that information in every chapter of the book - so you can build on your child’s communication development and have fun together at the same time!

This guidebook is of great use to parents who may be concerned about their child’s communication development. However, there is information for every parent or caregiver who just wants to know how best to help their young child develop strong communication skills.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

For more information, please visit www.hanen.org.

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