You’ve Already Started

Children don’t learn to talk all by themselves. They learn to communicate gradually as they spend time with the important people in their lives, especially their parents. You and your child have been communicating since he was born. Through this communication, you’ve developed a strong connection. To help him become the best communicator he can be, you just need to build on the connection you already have.

By reading *It Takes Two to Talk*, you’ll learn simple but powerful strategies for helping your child communicate to the best of his ability. You’ll find that everyday situations like getting him dressed or putting him to bed are ideal times to use these strategies. What’s more, you’ll see that building communication into your child’s everyday life won’t be hard work or stressful — for your child or for you. In fact, it will become a natural part of the time you spend together.

How and Why Children Communicate

Communication isn’t just about talking. Whenever two people send messages of any kind to each other — even without words — they are communicating. Babies communicate long before they start to talk — by crying, smiling, making sounds, moving their bodies or reaching for something. As children grow, they let you know what’s on their minds in other ways, such as through gestures, speech and signs. Learning more about how your child communicates is the first step toward helping him become a better communicator.

HOW Colin communicates with his mom: by looking at her, smiling and wiggling his arms and legs.

HOW Brian communicates with his dad: he looks, points and makes a sound.
Becoming aware of how your child communicates is important, but you also need to think about why he communicates. Even before they use words, children communicate for many different reasons: to tell you what they want or don’t want, to get your attention, to ask questions or to make comments. As their communication develops, they get better at letting you know what’s on their minds and what’s important to them.

**WHY Alicia communicates:**
*to ask her mom a question.*

**WHY Graham communicates:**
*to make a comment about his tractor.*

**WHY Adam communicates:**
*to tell his dad he doesn’t want something.*

**Signs and pictures**

When children understand what words mean, but are having a hard time learning to talk, they can learn to communicate by making signs or pointing to pictures instead. Throughout this book, whenever you see references to children using or learning words, this applies equally to signs or pictures. A speech-language professional can help you decide whether this approach could benefit your child.

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Learning more about how and why your child communicates will help you see and hear the messages he sends you — even the ones that aren’t so obvious. The following lists describe how and why children communicate. Circle or highlight the hows and whys you notice in your child.

HOW My Child Communicates:
- Cries or screams
- Smiles
- Moves his body (kicks, wiggles)
- Changes his facial expression
- Makes sounds
- Reaches
- Looks at me or at what he wants
- Imitates sounds
- Takes me by the hand to what he wants
- Looks at what he wants and then at me
- Points to what he wants
- Points to draw my attention to something
- Uses gestures, such as waving for bye-bye
- Uses sounds that stand for words
- Uses single words or signs
- Combines two or more words at a time

WHY My Child Communicates:
- Because he is hungry or tired
- Because he is happy
- To respond to something interesting, such as my voice
- To protest or refuse something
- To get attention
- To make a request
- To show/give me something
- To greet/say goodbye
- To respond to others
- To point out something of interest
- To ask a question
- To comment

Your Child’s Stage of Communication

Every child’s ability to communicate develops gradually over time. In It Takes Two to Talk, we divide the early years of communication development into four major stages:

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

Children with communication difficulties progress through the same stages as other children, but more slowly (although some children may not get through all the stages).
My Child’s Stage of Communication Development

Before you can help your child develop better communication skills, you need to know his stage of communication and all the things he is doing to communicate at that stage. There are four stages of communication: Discoverer, Communicator, First Words User and Combiner. Read the checklists below, which describe these four stages in terms of what your child understands and what he can express. Check off all the items under each column that apply to your child’s communication right now.

The blue shaded boxes under the name of each stage contain a brief description of the defining feature of that stage for both understanding and expression. After you have checked off all the items in the checklist that apply to your child’s communication, look at the stage name above the last blue shaded box you checked off for both understanding and expression. That’s your child’s stage. You may find that your child’s stage for understanding is different from his stage for expression.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discoverer</th>
<th>Understanding</th>
<th>Expression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>___ Doesn’t yet understand what words mean</td>
<td>___ Reacts to his environment. He does not yet send messages on purpose</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Recognizes familiar voices</td>
<td>___ Cries in different ways, depending on what he needs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Turns his head towards sound</td>
<td>___ Closes his eyes or turns away when he doesn’t want something</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Responds when I call his name by looking at me, moving his body or holding still</td>
<td>___ Looks at faces with interest</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Recognizes a few gestures, such as when I hold my arms out before picking him up</td>
<td>___ Becomes quiet or smiles when spoken to</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Shows he knows what’s coming next in a daily routine e.g., when I hold up his socks, he lifts his foot up</td>
<td>___ Makes sounds and moves his body – e.g., wiggles, kicks, when he is spoken to or smiled at</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Make a variety of facial expressions</td>
<td>___ Turns towards sounds/my voice</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Moves his body – e.g., reaches when he wants something</td>
<td>___ Imitates actions - e.g., bangs on his high chair</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Makes sounds, like “aaah,” “ooh,” “guh,” “muh”</td>
<td>___ Babbles - e.g., “bababa,” “mamama”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Imitates sounds I make</td>
<td>___ Imitates sounds I make</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>___ Enjoys games like Peek-a-boo</td>
<td>___ Enjoys games like Peek-a-boo</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Communicator

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding</th>
<th>Expression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>__ Understands familiar words in everyday situations__</td>
<td>__ Sends messages on purpose using a combination of looks, sounds and/or gestures (without using words)*__</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>__ Understands familiar words in routine situations, like byebye or up__</td>
<td>__ Communicates for a variety of reasons, such as:__</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| __ Understands names of familiar objects like bottle, light or ball__ |  - To protest/refuse something — e.g., shakes head for “no”  
  - To make a request — e.g., hands me container to open  
  - To get attention — e.g., makes sounds, gestures  
  - To show/give me something — e.g., hands me toy  
  - To greet/say goodbye — e.g., waves byebye  
  - To respond to others — e.g., points to and hands me object I asked about  
  - To point out something of interest — e.g., points to object/person and looks back at me |
| __ Responds to simple questions like, “Where's your teddy bear?” by moving to the object, looking at or pointing to it__ | __ Strings sounds together that almost sound like speech (jargon)__ |
| __ Follows simple directions when these are paired with gestures__ | __ Consistently makes sounds that mean something specific — e.g., “huh-huh” (panting for a dog)__ |
| __ Understands the word “no”__ | __ Occasionally uses a single word__ |

### First Words User

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Understanding</th>
<th>Expression</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>__ Understands the names of many familiar objects, people and animals__</td>
<td>__ Communicates primarily by using single words*__</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>__ Can point to many body parts and familiar objects__</td>
<td>__ Uses a larger number of gestures and sounds__</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>__ Follows a few simple instructions without the adult showing or using gestures — e.g., “kiss the baby”__</td>
<td>__ Imitates sounds (e.g., animal/car sounds) and words__</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>__ Can answer yes-or-no questions, such as, “Do you want some banana?”__</td>
<td>__ Uses single words for all the same reasons as a Communicator, as well as:__</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| __ Responds to simple when and what questions — e.g., “Where's your shoe?” or “What do you want to drink?”__ |  - To ask a question — e.g., “Dada?” with rising intonation to ask where Dad is  
  - To comment — e.g., “wet!”  
  - Uses a variety of word types, such as:  
    - People — e.g., “mama”  
    - Objects — e.g., “ball”  
    - Social words — e.g., “bye bye”  
    - Rejection/Refusal — e.g., “no”  
    - Actions — e.g., “eat”  
    - Describing words — e.g., “big”  
    - Location words — e.g., “there”  
  - Uses gestures and words together — e.g., asks to be picked up by lifting his arms while saying, “up” |
| __ Uses gestures and words together — e.g., asks to be picked up by lifting his arms while saying, “up”__ | __ Uses 10-25 words__ |
| __ Uses 25-50 words__ | __ Occasionally says 2 word phrases__ |

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Setting Communication Goals: Interaction goals come before Expression goals

The goals listed for each stage of communication on page 14 will give you a good idea of where you are headed in helping build your child’s communication. We know that children learn to communicate within enjoyable back and forth interactions with the important adults in their lives, so having good interaction skills is a critical part of language learning for your child. For this reason, we always start with interaction goals.

1. Interaction Goal: First Turns: My child will take the **first turn** in interactions with me.
   
   *(For Communicators, First Words Users and Combiners)*

2. Interaction Goal: More Turns: My child will take **more turns** back and forth in interactions with me.
   
   *(For children at all four stages)*

3. Interaction Goal: Have Fun: My child will **have fun** interacting with me.
   
   *(For children at all four stages)*

Once your child is taking first turns and the two of you are having fun taking more turns, you can choose a communication goal that focuses on improving his expression. You will now help him **take a specific turn** during your interactions.

4. Expressive Communication Goal: Specific Turn: My child will take a **specific turn** during our interactions. He will:

   *(choose one or two goals from the chart on page 14)*

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When deciding on your child’s expressive communication goal, you can choose one of two approaches. You can help him:
- do more at his current stage of communication; or
- move towards the next stage of communication

See pages 99 - 106 for detailed information on how to select the appropriate expressive communication goal for your child. Information on building your child’s understanding can be found on pages 84 - 86, as well as throughout Chapter 7. It is highly recommended that you consult a speech-language pathologist, who will assess your child and help you select appropriate goals.

**Communication and Language Goals at Each Stage**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discoverer Goals</th>
<th>Communicator Goals</th>
<th>First Words User Goals</th>
<th>Combiner Goals</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Do more at the Discoverer stage:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Do more at the Communicator stage:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Do more at the First Words User stage:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Do more at the Combiner stage:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Show he’s paying attention to me for longer periods by looking at me, making facial expressions, moving his body or making sounds</em></td>
<td><em>Send messages on purpose for a variety of reasons, such as asking for something, sharing his interest, or showing something</em></td>
<td><em>Use the words he has more often</em></td>
<td><em>Use the 2 word phrases he has more often</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Use more looks, facial expressions, body movements or sounds</em></td>
<td><em>Send messages using a combination of looks, sounds, gestures</em></td>
<td><em>Use the words he has for a variety of reasons</em></td>
<td><em>Use a variety of word types in 2 word phrases, like:</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Imitate actions or sounds I make</em></td>
<td><em>Imitate many different sounds, gestures</em></td>
<td><em>Use a variety of word types, like:</em></td>
<td><em>People (sit daddy!)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Show he knows what’s coming next in a routine</em></td>
<td><em>Spontaneously use many different gestures</em></td>
<td><em>Objects (teddy)</em></td>
<td><em>Objects (teddy fall)</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Move towards the Communicator stage once he’s made the communication connection:** | **Move towards the First Words User stage:** | **Move towards the Combiner stage:** | **Continue his communication development:** |
| _Send a message to get my attention_ | _Add sounds to most of his turns_ | _Use 50 or more words_ | _Say longer phrases_ |
| _Send a message to let me know he wants something_ | _Imitate words_ | _Start to use 2 word phrases_ | _Use more complete sentences_ |
| _Look at something and back at me_ | _Spontaneously use a few words_ | | |
| _Start to use gestures, e.g., lifts arms up to ask to be picked up_ | | | |
OWL to Let Your Child Lead

The next step to letting your child lead is to OWL:

Observe
Wait
Listen

The first letters of these three important words – OWL - will help you remember them.

OWLing is an important strategy that you can use with your child throughout an interaction. When you OWL, you give your child a chance to start an interaction and open up opportunities for communication. You may even discover that your child is communicating more than you realized.

Observe

Sometimes it’s hard to know what’s on your child’s mind. Taking the time to observe her body language – her actions, gestures and facial expressions – will help you figure it out. By tuning in to these messages, you can learn a lot about what she’s interested in and what she wants to tell you. Notice what your child is looking at. Look in the direction in which she’s reaching or pointing. Discovering what has captured your child’s interest will help you share the moment with her.

Mom was trying to get Megan to look in the mirror, but then she observed that Megan was more interested in something else — her sock had come off. Now they can talk about what really interests Megan.
Wait

Waiting is a powerful tool. It gives you time to observe what your child is interested in. Even more importantly, it gives your child time to start an interaction or respond to what you’ve said or done. In this book, wait means three things: stop talking, lean forward and look at your child expectantly. Your child may be used to everyone else doing the communicating. Waiting in this way will send her the message that you’re ready for her to respond to you or, better still, to take the lead herself. Once your child does one of these things, it’s important for you to respond to her immediately. (You’ll learn more about how to do this in Chapter 3.)

If you need to remind yourself to wait, count slowly to 10 — silently, of course. At first, you may not be used to that much silence. Your child may not be used to it either. But be patient and don’t rush to say something. It may take some time for her to communicate with you. If your child switches from one activity to another, wait again. Give her a chance to get involved in the new activity. Then give her still more time to start an interaction.

The most important thing to remember about waiting is to give your child enough time to understand that you expect her to send you a message — any message. It doesn’t matter whether she sends it with sounds, words or gestures. Anything that your child does or says to make her needs or interests known to you is a message. Take another look at the "My Child's Stage of Communication Development" checklist you completed on pages 11 - 13. There you’ll find some of the ways in which your child may send a message.

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Listen

Listening means paying close attention to all of your child’s words and sounds. Take care not to interrupt her, even if you’ve already figured out what she’s telling you. When you listen to your child’s message, you’re also letting her know that what she says is important to you. This helps build her confidence and self-esteem.

Even when you OWL, there will be times when you cannot understand your child’s message. This can be frustrating for both of you. At times like these, look at the situation for clues and guess what she’s trying to tell you.

If you can’t even begin to guess your child’s message, imitate her sounds or actions and then wait to see if she does anything to make her message clearer. You may still not understand, but it’s important to make the effort. When you do, you let her know that you’re trying your best to understand her. You’re also showing her that what’s on her mind is very important to you.