

# The Four Stages of Communication in It Takes Two to Talk®

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Parents are always eager for their child to start using words. In your role as an SLP, it's important to help them understand that **children's communication develops along a continuum**: First, children are pre-intentional, next they explore how to send messages without using words, then early words emerge.

Helping parents tune in to *how* and *why* their child already communicates is an essential first step in establishing a child-centred focus to intervention.

Parents' **expectations are more realistic** when they better understand how their child communicates. This helps them to focus on what their child can do and is already doing.

When parents **wait** for their child to communicate (and know what to wait for) and then **respond** with interest, the child is encouraged to keep the interaction going.

It Takes Two to Talk® is designed for children with a range of language abilities. To help parents understand their child's current abilities, *It Takes Two to Talk* organizes children's communication into **four simple Stages of Communication**:

1. Discoverer Stage
2. Communicator Stage
3. First Words User Stage
4. Combiner Stage

Each stage comprises expressive skills – *ways* a child communicates and the *reasons* they do – and receptive skills. Sometimes parents are focused on milestones and what their child “should” be doing by a particular age. But it's important to remember **the Stages of Communication in *It Takes Two to Talk* are independent of age**.

So, let's take a closer look at the four Stages of Communication in *It Takes Two to Talk*, including the skills expected at each stage. Then, try out your knowledge with two interactive case examples below!

## Discoverer Stage

Children who are at the Discoverer Stage are **pre-intentional**. This means **they do not yet send messages with a specific purpose in mind**, and they do not yet understand what is said to them.

### Communication Skills at the Discoverer Stage

How?	Why?
<p>Children at this stage do not communicate on purpose, but they react to what is happening around them and how they are feeling by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Looking</li> <li>• Moving their bodies</li> <li>• Crying</li> <li>• Smiling and laughing</li> <li>• Reaching for objects</li> <li>• Making sounds</li> </ul>	<p>Children at this stage do not yet communicate with a specific reason or purpose in mind.</p>

You can support parents of children at the Discoverer Stage to recognize their child’s communication and respond as though the messages are intentional.

## Communicator Stage

Beginning at the **Communicator Stage**, children **do send messages intentionally**. Children learn to send messages for many different reasons and use a variety of expressive communication skills to deliver those messages. They understand familiar words in familiar situations, simple questions, and simple directions paired with gestures.

### Communication Skills at the Communicator Stage

How?	Why?
<p>Children at this stage may communicate by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gesturing while looking</li> <li>• Making a sound while looking</li> <li>• Looking, gesturing, and making a sound</li> <li>• Using fun sounds with meaning (e.g., <i>uh oh, woof, whee!</i>)</li> <li>• Making consistent sounds that mean something specific</li> </ul>	<p>Children at this stage communicate to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Protest / refuse</li> <li>• Request</li> <li>• Get attention</li> <li>• Give something</li> <li>• Show their interests</li> <li>• Greet someone</li> <li>• Respond to others’ communication</li> </ul>

The key feature of the Communicator Stage is **that children send messages for all the reasons listed above without using words!** At the later Communicator Stage, they may begin to imitate single words, which is an important step in moving to the next stage.

## First Words User Stage

At the First Words User Stage, Children start to **send messages using primarily single words**. Parents may have to be a “detective,” because their child’s one word might be used to express many different reasons for communicating. For example, if a child at the First Words User stage says, “Go” they may be requesting their favourite chase game, they may have noticed something that went by, or they may be asking you to move out of the way!

Children at the First Words User Stage understand words for many familiar objects and people. They also respond to simple questions and follow simple directions without the support of gestures.

### Communication Skills at the First Words User Stage

How?	Why?
Children at this stage may communicate by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using gestures and sounds</li> <li>• Using single words, signs, or pictures</li> <li>• Using a gesture and a word together</li> </ul>	Children at this stage communicate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For all the same reasons as at the Communicator Stage</li> <li>• To ask questions</li> <li>• To comment about their interests</li> </ul>

## Combiner Stage

Once children have approximately 50 single words, and a variety of word types in their vocabulary, they typically **begin to combine them into 2+ word phrases**. When children reach the Combiner Stage, they can respond to more complex questions, understand events further into the past and future, and follow simple stories.

### Communication Skills at the Combiner Stage

How?	Why?
Children at this stage may communicate by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Using 50+ single words/signs</li> <li>• Using 2+ word phrases</li> <li>• Using a variety of word types (nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc.)</li> </ul>	Children at this stage communicate: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• For all the reasons developed at previous stages</li> <li>• To ask more complex <i>Wh-</i> questions</li> <li>• To make comments about things beyond the here-and-now</li> </ul>

## To Sum Up

**Helping parents understand their child’s current communication abilities is an important first step in learning to be responsive to their child’s messages.** When parents know how their child communicates, they are better prepared to respond to every effort their child makes to send a message. And when parents are responsive, they support their child’s ongoing participation in enjoyable interactions, which provides their child with many opportunities to learn how communication works.

Once you are certified in *It Takes Two to Talk*, you can use the *My Child's Stage of Communication Checklist* to guide parents to identify their child’s current abilities. Best of all, the child’s next steps are laid out in the Checklist for parents to see.

You are eligible to take *It Takes Two to Talk* training even while you are student.

## References

Weitzman, E. (2017). *It Takes Two to Talk: A Practical Guide for Parents of Children with Language Delays*, 5th ed. Toronto, Ontario: The Hanen Centre.

### 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 on the autism spectrum, and those who are developing typically.*

*For more information, please visit [www.hanen.org](http://www.hanen.org).*

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