Timing is Everything: A Look at the Importance of Parents' Response Time

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Imagine this scenario…

Parent: Sitting beside child, who is doing a puzzle
Child: Points to a puzzle piece that's broken and says, "Buh"
15 seconds pass
Parent: "That piece is broken."
Child: No longer looking at the broken piece. He is now trying to fit a different piece into the puzzle.

Most of us are likely to have seen a scenario similar to the one described, when parents have missed opportunities to keep the interaction going by not responding immediately to their child. This delayed response time could be due to a variety of reasons: perhaps the parent was distracted, thinking about something else; maybe they didn't observe or recognize the child's turn; or, perhaps they were trying to figure out how best to respond. Regardless of the reasons a parent might not respond to their child's messages, our most important task is often to help parents become more responsive. We need to help them to encourage their child to initiate and, once the child sends a message, to respond immediately with interest.

What are the components of parental responsiveness?

Responding immediately with interest – which is part of following the child's lead in It Takes Two to Talk®, is an important aspect of responsive interactions. Parental responsiveness motivates children to stay in the interaction when the parent's response is:

1. **Contingent**: what the parent says is dependent on and directly related to what the child communicates - e.g., if the child points to an airplane, the parent talks about the airplane.
2. **Warm**: the parent responds in a positive and sensitive way - e.g., "That's an airplane," - said with an encouraging tone while looking and smiling at the child.
3. **Prompt**: parent responds *immediately* after the child communicates (Bornstein, Tamis-LeMonda, Hahn & Haynes, 2008; Lloyd & Masur, 2014)

Why is it important for parents to respond promptly to their child's turn?

When parents respond *promptly*, they increase the likelihood that the child will link this response to his or her communicative act— *if the response occurs within 5 seconds of the child's turn* (Bornstein, Tamis-LeMonda, Hahn & Haynes, 2008). The child will likely not associate the parent's response with what they've communicated if too much time has passed. If a parent waits too long to respond, the child will

likely assume that the parent is not listening to what he was communicating (Reed, Pasek, Golinkoff, 2016). The pairing of contingent language with a child's current focus of interest is important, as research has shown that children are more likely to learn the label for an object or action if it directly matches their focus, especially when offered *promptly* following the child's turn (Dunham & Dunham, 1995).

A Study on Parents' Response Time and Children's Vocabulary Size

A recent study by Marklund, Marklund, Lacerda & Schwarz (2015) examined the amount of time parents paused before responding to their child's turn and compared this response time to the vocabulary size of the child. Previous studies have suggested that, when talking to children, parents adjust their speech both in terms of length of utterances, as well as in terms of their response time. It is hypothesized that these speech adjustments can affect children's language development, and Marklund and colleagues (2015) predicted that the response time of parents may have an impact on children's vocabulary development.

The 15 children included in this study, whose primary language was Swedish:

- Were 18 months of age and presented with no reported health or developmental concerns.
- Were selected based on the children's expressive vocabulary size at 18 months of age, measured using the Swedish version of the MacArthur Communicative Development Inventory (MCDI).
- Were grouped based on their vocabulary size:
  - Large vocabulary size (90-100% percentile range on the MCDI, concluding that the child's vocabulary size was larger than expected for their age)
  - Typical vocabulary size (50-75% percentile range)
  - Small vocabulary size (0-25% percentile range)

Method:

Audio recordings of spontaneous parent-child interactions were collected over eight days and included everyday activities such as mealtime, playtime, reading and getting dressed. The recordings were then examined to determine how long the parents paused prior to responding to their child's verbal turns.

Assessment of the parents' response time in the study:

- Five minutes of each audio recording was selected and objectively measured based on the vocalized turns between the parent and the child.
- These vocal turns were manually measured by marking the utterance duration for both the parent and the child. Once the utterances were marked, the authors then measured the amount of time between the child's utterance and the parents' response.

Key Findings:

The authors in the study looked for associations between the response time of parents to children with varying vocabulary sizes. They found that the average response time for parents was different for each vocabulary group. The findings were as follows:

Children with:	Had Parent who responded:
Large vocabularies	Faster
Typically-sized vocabularies	Slower than parents of children with large vocabularies
Small vocabularies	Slowest

Implications for Clinical Practice

We are all well aware of the importance of contingent responding. However, this study gives us good reason to highlight the importance of responding promptly in our work with parents. Prompt responses from a parent increase a child's sense of competence, facilitating his or her motivation to initiate and remain engaged in the interaction (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Weitzman, Girolametto & Greenberg, 2016). It is also easier for a child to learn language when parents are responsive because he can apply all his cognitive resources to his existing focus of interest, rather than having to shift his attention to something new (Girolametto & Weitzman, 2016). In addition, a parent's failure to respond promptly increases the likelihood that the child will leave the interaction, resulting in the loss of important language learning opportunities.

Studies show that children who present with language impairments do not experience the same language learning environments when compared to parents of typically developing children. Children with language impairments are often provided with less responsive interactions, in that parents of infants with communication difficulties spend half as much time interacting with their infant and label items less frequently (Roberts and Kaiser, 2011). In terms of promptness, as mentioned earlier in this article, parents tend to respond more slowly to children with smaller vocabularies (i.e. children who are language impaired or at risk of a language impairment). Thus, the children who require the most responsive interactions from parents are, in actuality, getting the least parental responsiveness.

The findings from Marklund et al (2015) also suggest that a child's communication ability influences the responsiveness of the parent. This was reflected in the study's results, which showed that children with larger vocabularies appear to elicit faster responsive comments from their parents, setting the stage for more back and forth engaged interactions. Clearly, this results in richer language learning environments.

How can we encourage parents to respond promptly to their children's turns?

The strategies below from It Takes Two to Talk® are designed to encourage prompt responding:

Observe, Wait and Listen™
For parents to be responsive to their children, they must be attentive to the child's interests and must also observe his or her communication acts. When you teach parents to become more aware of their child's communication by Observing, Waiting and Listening (OWL), you are setting the stage for the child to take the lead in the interaction. You are also creating an opportunity for the parent to respond immediately based on the child's interest.

Respond Immediately with interest
Parents responding *immediately* with interest is a critical component of parental responsiveness, as this involves a prompt response, as well as a contingent and warm one.

Summary

Encouraging parents to respond promptly when their child takes a turn is a crucial part of how we can support families of children with language impairments. This group of children need the most responsive interactions. By encouraging parents to *respond immediately with interest* we are helping link the parents' response to the child's communicative act, promoting the child's vocabulary development. Responsive interactions between the parent and child is the way in which we help parents engage in frequent, meaningful and longer lasting interactions.

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