



## Combining Words Together: A Big Step in Language Development

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It's so exciting when a child says his first word. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, a child should say his first word by 15 months of age [1]. Parents eagerly await this milestone and proudly record their child's first word amongst his other achievements in his "baby book".

But another milestone which receives a lot less attention is also very important for a child's language development -- that is, a child's ability to combine words. Children's first word combinations express two ideas using any two words (such as "Daddy up" when the child wants to be picked up). But as children progress, their combinations start to include verbs, such as "want juice" or "car go!". These combinations that include verbs are important as they set the stage for the child's grammar skills to develop. Children should be combining two words together by 24 months of age [1].



A recent study looked at children's first words and first word combinations, and whether delays in either of these milestones predicted later language problems. Interestingly, children who were late to combine words were more at risk for future problems with language than children who were late with their first words [2].

As toddlers move from using single words to combining them, parents and caregivers often have questions about this stage of language development. Here are some common questions and answers about children's early word combinations.

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## Common Questions about Word Combinations

### *Are “thank you” and “night night” examples of two-word combinations?*

Some toddlers learn expressions like “thank you” and “night night” early on, and parents may think that these are evidence of two-word combinations. However, these expressions are memorized as a single “chunk” of language, as opposed to two separate words that the child has combined together. When children learn “thank you”, they are not able to combine either of these words with other words to form new combinations (such as “thank Mom” or “you go”). True two-word combinations express two separate ideas.

### *My child uses several single words. Is he ready to combine words together?*

Before a child can combine two words together, he must be able to:

- **use a variety of words** – In order to combine words, children need more than just nouns (names of people, places, things) in their vocabulary. Once children can use some early verbs (action words like “go”, “pour”, “give”), adjectives (words that describe like “hot”, “big”, “fast”) and/or prepositions (location words like “on”, “in”, “off”), they have the building blocks needed to combine words together.
- **express two ideas** – Before children express two ideas with two-word combinations, they can usually express two ideas by using a word and a “supplementary” gesture. Supplementary gestures add additional information to the word that is spoken. For example, when a child points to the cookie jar and says “Mommy”, his message has two ideas: he wants *Mommy* to give him a *cookie*. Or when a child does an action for “big” with his arms while pointing to a large teddy bear, his message has two ideas: the *bear* is *big*. This shouldn’t be confused with the child’s use of gestures that match the meaning of his word (e.g. pointing to a cookie and saying “cookie”), as this only expresses one idea.

When parents and caregivers notice that a child’s vocabulary includes words other than just nouns and he starts to use supplementary gestures, he is likely ready to start combining two words together.

### *My child isn’t combining words together. Should I be concerned?*

If your child is 24 months of age or older and not yet combining two words together, you can contact a speech-language pathologist (SLP) for advice. The SLP will assess your child’s speech and language skills and determine if your child has any other risk factors for ongoing difficulties with language.

### *How can I help my child learn to combine words together?*

- **Follow your child’s lead** – Children need a lot of practice sending messages, both with and without words, before they learn to combine words. In order to encourage your child to send messages, you need to follow his lead by observing him and waiting for him to send you a message. By letting him lead the interaction, he will be motivated to communicate

with you. Get down to his level, notice what he is doing, and let him send you messages about whatever captures his interest at the moment. Then respond by saying something related to his message.

- **Emphasize a variety of words** – When you play and interact with your child, emphasize new words that are based on his interests at that moment. Use actions and your voice to make these new words stand out. Think about highlighting words other than just nouns, such as simple verbs (e.g. “stop”, “push”, “wash”), adjectives (e.g. “small”, “soft”, “cold”), and prepositions (e.g. “in”, “on”, “down”, “up”). Verbs are especially important for building early sentences and for the development of children’s grammar skills [3]. (For more information on helping your child learn some early verbs, see our article “[Verbs Pave the Way for Language Development](#)”.)
- **Model short, grammatical sentences** – Even though children’s first word combinations lack proper grammar (e.g. “go car”, “want juice”, “me up”), it’s important that you provide your child with models that are grammatically correct. This helps your child understand how words are used together and what the words mean. For example, if your child says “go car” when he is getting in the car, you can say “You are going in the car”. Or if your child says “want juice”, you could say “You want some juice”.
- **Expand your child’s words** – You can expand your child’s language by using his single word in a short sentence. If your child says “fast” while pushing a car, you can turn that into a little sentence like “The car is fast!”. Or if he smiles while eating a cookie and says “cookie”, you can say “It’s a yummy cookie”.
- **Add gestures to your words** – When you use gestures while you speak, it shows your child how to use gestures and words at the same time. This will prepare your child for using supplementary gestures.

These ideas about promoting word combinations come from [Target Word™ - The Hanen Program® for Parents of Children Who Are Late Talkers](#) [4].

## References

1. Hagan, J., Shaw, J. S., & Duncan, P. M. (Eds.). (2008). *Bright futures: Guidelines for health supervision of infants, children, and adolescents* (3rd ed.). Elk Grove Village, IL: American Academy of Pediatrics.
2. Rudolph, J. M. & Leonard, L. B. (2016). Early language milestones and specific language impairment. *Journal of Early Intervention*, 38(1) 41 –58.
3. Hadley, P. A., Rispoli, M. & Hsu, N. (2016). Toddlers’ verb lexicon diversity and grammatical outcomes. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 47, 44–58.

4. Earle, C. with Lowry, L. (2015). *Making Hanen Happen Leaders Guide for Target Word™ — The Hanen Program® for Parents of Children Who Are Late Talkers, Fourth Edition*. Hanen Early Language Program: Toronto, ON.

### **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.*

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