



The Power of Turn-taking: How Back-and-forth Interactions Help Children Learn Language

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Having a back-and-forth conversation with a child may seem like a small thing, but it turns out it's everything when it comes to helping them learn language.

A new study has shown that the more children participate in back-and-forth interactions with their caregivers, the more activity they have in the part of the brain responsible for language production and processing. The study also showed a strong connection between the number of turns children take in conversation and the scores they receive on standardized language tests [1,2]. The more children are involved in back-and-forth exchanges, the greater the impact on their language skills.

What makes back-and-forth interactions so powerful?

There's a lot children learn when they're involved in back-and-forth conversations that they couldn't learn if they just listened to someone else speak. This comparison chart shows just some of the advantages of conversation:

Learning opportunity for children	Just listening to words (e.g. watching TV or videos, or just listening to an adult talk)	Participating in a conversation
Hear a variety of words they may use on their own later on	Maybe	Yes
Learn to pay attention to someone else	Maybe	Yes
Learn how to start an interaction	No	Yes
Learn how and when to take a turn in an interaction	No	Yes
Learn how to send a message effectively	No	Yes
Learn to clarify or repeat a message if it wasn't understood	No	Yes
Practice using words and gestures	No	Yes
Learn to ask questions	No	Yes
Draw on previous knowledge, experience and problem-solving skills to articulate a point of view	No	Yes
Build confidence in communicating	No	Yes

So it's easy to see why back and forth interactions have a greater influence on children's brain development and language learning than just hearing words. While it's important to expose your child to lots of words, what's much more important is involving him in high-quality, enjoyable interactions where he has the opportunity to take as many back-and-forth turns as possible.

How to set the stage for turn-taking

Parents and caregivers are in the best possible position to encourage the back-and-forth conversations that help children learn. That's why the focus of all Hanen Programs and resources is helping these important adults engage children in high-quality interactions.

Here are a few ideas and strategies we share with parents to help them set the stage for an enjoyable interaction with lots of turn-taking:

When and where to do it

Any time and anywhere! The best thing about high quality interactions is that they're most likely to happen during everyday situations like having a bath, walking to the park, or getting ready for bed. Basically, any situation in which your child is having a good time and is enjoying your company is the perfect time to have the interaction.

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Some helpful Hanen strategies

- **OWL™ (Observe, wait and Listen™)** – This key strategy allows the child to lead the interaction. It gives him the opportunity to take the first turn about something that interests him, and allows you to respond to what has captured his attention. This is a critical first step because children are much more likely to take another turn and stay in the conversation when they have started the interaction:
 - **Observe** – Get face-to-face with your child and don't say anything. Just pay close attention to what he's interested in. His eye gaze, gestures, facial expressions and sounds are important clues.
 - **Wait** – Without speaking, wait to give your child a chance to send you a message. Remember that he doesn't need to use words – he might just give you a quick look or make a gesture. Pay close attention or you might miss it.
 - **Listen** – Your child may also send a message with words or sounds. Treat any sound, look or gesture as your child's first "turn" in the interaction. [3]
- **Follow Your Child's Lead** – Now that your child has taken the first turn, respond immediately by saying or doing something that's directly related to what he just communicated. For example, if he stacks a few blocks on top of each other and then looks at you and smiles, you could say, "Wow, you're building a tower!". Then wait quietly again. If your child takes another turn on the same topic, take another turn as well. Then wait without speaking for him to take another turn. When he does, that's success! You've established a back-and-forth interaction. Keep it going for as many turns as possible by sticking to what your child is interested in, responding by building on what he has said or done, and remembering to wait to give him a chance to respond. [3]

As the back-and-forth turns continue, you'll know he's learning a lot. But you'll also be able to see that he's really enjoying the interaction and connecting with you. He'll have no idea how much he's learning or that his brain is doing important work – he'll just know he's having fun!

For more tips on how to create high-quality interactions and promote turn-taking, see our article, [“It's Quality, Not Just Quantity, That Helps Your Child Learn Language”](#).



128 Conversation Starters

You'll find more ideas on how to spark high-quality interactions and promote turn-taking in our 2019 Calendar, *Preparing Young Children for School Success*. [Learn more and see sample pages.](#)

References

1. Pryor, J. (Feb. 14, 2018). Beyond the 30 Million Word Gap: Back-and-forth exchanges boost children's brain response to language. Retrieved on April 7, 2018 from: <http://mcgovern.mit.edu/news/news/research-news/beyond-the-30-million-word-gap/>
2. Romeo, R.R., Leonard, J.A., Robinson, S.T., West, M.R., Mackey, A.P., Rowe, M.L. & Gabrieli, J.D.E. (2018). Beyond the 30-Million-Word Gap: Children's Conversational Exposure Is Associated With Language-Related Brain Function. *Psychological Science*.
3. Weitzman, E. *It Takes Two to Talk: A Practical Guide for Parents of Children with Language Delays*, 5th Edition. Toronto: Hanen Early Language Program, 2017.

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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