



How to Help Your Child Use Early Sentences

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It's really exciting when children start to combine words into little sentences. This big step in their language development usually happens when they are about 30 months old, but it may happen later for children with language delays.

There are many things you can do to help your child learn to use sentences. Whether your child is developing typically or has a language delay, you can talk to your child in a way that encourages his sentence development:

Use short, grammatical sentences

Sometimes people think they can help a child develop sentences by simplifying their own language, but they simplify so much that they eliminate proper grammar (e.g. They might say "Want cookie?" instead of "Do you want a cookie?", or "Mommy help" instead of "I will help you"). While using shorter sentences can help young children, they need to hear well-formed sentences with correct grammar in order to learn about the rules of their language. So keep your sentences short but grammatical.

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Use longer sentences to encourage understanding

Most children can understand more than they can say. So, you don't need to keep all of your sentences short. In order to encourage your child's understanding, you can use sentences that are a bit longer, especially when you are giving instructions or reading books together and talking about the pictures.

Talk about your child's interests

Follow your child's lead, observe what he is doing and paying attention to, and talk about whatever has caught his attention. Pause and wait to provide him with many opportunities to try and use words and sentences. If you do all of the talking, he won't have a chance to practice building sentences.

Build your child's vocabulary, especially verbs

Children need to know how to say many words in order to combine them into sentences. Using a variety of words when you speak to your child will help your child learn new words. Verbs (action words like "dance", "fall", and "pour") are especially important for building sentences.

Don't correct your child's mistakes

When children start to form sentences they often leave out words or make errors with grammar, and this is perfectly normal. It's important that children feel encouraged as they start to experiment with combining different words. So instead of correcting your child, repeat what he said, but use the correct grammar. In this way, he hears how the sentence should sound, but isn't pressured to try to say it.

Expand what your child says

If your child uses a single word or makes a grammatical mistake, you can expand what he said by using his word(s) in a sentence and adding a few words. For example, if your child points to a bird in a tree and says "bird", you could say "That bird is in the tree!". If your child wants to play ball with you and says "ball", you could say "Let's play ball." If your child leaves out some of the grammar and says "Daddy go car," you can expand by adding the correct grammar, "Yes, Daddy is going in the car. He has to go to work." In this way, you acknowledge and encourage your child, but also provide an example that is one small step ahead that he can learn from.

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Use a variety of subjects in your sentences

A sentence needs a **subject** (a person, place, thing, or idea that is doing something), and children need to hear many examples of subjects in order to learn how to use them themselves. Some early developing subjects are listed below [2]. You can use these subjects in your sentences when you interact and play with your child in the following ways:

- "I" – talk about your own thoughts and actions ("I'm hungry"; "I see a bird in the tree")
- "you" – talk about your child's feelings and actions ("You are jumping so high!")
- "he/she/it" – talk about others' feelings and actions ("He's fast!"; "It feels squishy")
- "we" - talk about things you and your child do together ("We are going to the store")
- the names of people and objects – talk about the toys your child is playing with or characters in books ("Teddy is hungry"; "The baby is sleeping")

By using some of these simple tips, you can build your child's vocabulary and provide examples of early sentences. If you are concerned about your child's development, talk to your doctor or a speech language pathologist. Our article "When should you seek help?" provides milestones for different ages so that you can determine if your child has developed all of the skills one would expect for his age.

References

1. Weitzman, E. (2017). *It Takes Two to Talk® (5th ed.)*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: The Hanen Centre.
2. Hadley, P. A., McKenna, M. M. & Rispoli, M. (2018). Sentence Diversity in Early Language Development: Recommendations for Target Selection and Progress Monitoring. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 27, 553-565.

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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