



## Three Keys to Helping Your Child Learn Language

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As a parent, there are many things you can do to help your child learn to talk. If you search the internet, you'll find suggestions about reading to your child, teaching him songs and nursery rhymes, and playing imaginatively together. These are wonderful activities, but when it comes to learning language, it's not just about the games or books you share together. It has more to do with how you interact and talk to your child during these activities that makes all the difference.

There are three key things you can do during any activity that will help your child learn language:

### 1. Allow your child to lead the interaction

All of us tend to talk when we have something to say, and that usually happens when we are interested in the topic or something captures our attention in the moment. It's the same for children – they are most likely to try to communicate about their interests.

When you watch your child closely to see what he does, you will see what he's interested in. If you wait quietly for a moment, he might take the lead by showing you something, using a gesture or action, or even a word. Then, you can respond by talking about whatever it is that's caught his attention. If you continue to let your child lead and respond to him in this way, it encourages him to keep sending you more messages about his interests.

Allowing your child to lead the interaction ensures he is motivated to communicate with you, making it more likely that he will stay in the interaction. The longer he stays with you in an interaction, the more opportunities he'll have to hear language as you interact together. These back-and-forth interactions are actually

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[early conversations](#), and young children who have more of these little conversations tend to have better language skills later on [1].

## 2. Use words and sentences just slightly above your child's level

The next key to helping your child is to use language that is one step ahead of your child's level. If you are one small step ahead, you will give your child an example of how to move to the next level of language development.

To do this, you need to be aware of the ways your child is communicating right now. For example, he might send messages by:

- Looking at you
- Making sounds
- Using [gestures](#) (reaching for or giving you things, pointing, waving, etc.)
- Using single words (one at a time)
- [Combining two or three words together](#)
- Using sentences

If your child is communicating without words (by looking, making sounds, or gestures), use language that is slightly ahead by speaking in short, simple sentences with correct grammar. Avoid leaving out words or simplifying grammar because it makes it harder for children to learn the meaning of words and how to use them in a sentence (e.g. avoid saying "Daddy go" and instead say "Daddy's going") [2]. You can also use single words sometimes, but make sure to balance these with short sentences.

If your child is using words or combining words into short sentences, you can up the ante by speaking in sentences that are slightly longer than your child's sentences. By always staying one little step ahead of your child, you will give him many examples of how to combine more words and use longer sentences himself. A helpful way to stay one step ahead is to expand what your child says by using his word(s) in a slightly longer sentence. For example, if your child holds up a big ball and says "ball", you can keep the conversation going by saying "Ooh that's a big ball!". If your child says "want cookie", you can respond by saying "You want a cookie. You love cookies."

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### 3. Talk about things that build your child's understanding

The final key to helping your child is to talk about things that get him thinking and build his understanding. The things you talk about will depend on your child's interests as well as on his stage of language development:

- Children who haven't started talking yet or are using a few words need to hear you talk about the things they see and experience during their daily activities. This type of language is very concrete and describes [what is happening in the moment](#). For example, if your toddler is trying to build a tower with blocks and he says "down!" as they fall down, you can describe what's happening in the moment by saying "Oh no! Your blocks fell down".
- As children start to use more words and short phrases, they begin to understand simple comments and questions about things that happened in the recent past or will happen in the near future ("We're going to Grandma's house today"), or descriptions or explanations about things that happen in the moment (e.g. "We can't use the wagon because the wheel is broken").
- When children start to use sentences, you can keep building their understanding by talking about more abstract topics (things they can't see or touch or aren't experiencing at that moment). These types of topics extend your child's thinking and help connect his experiences with abstract language and ideas. Some examples include:
  - longer descriptions and explanations ("The muffins still look kind of gooey. I think we should put them back in the oven to cook a bit longer")
  - language that describes things in the past or future ("Remember when we went tobogganing and Daddy fell off and was covered in snow?!");
  - language used to predict or solve problems ("The fairy used up all of her fairy dust so she can't rescue the prince. What do you think she'll do now?")
  - language to describe peoples' thoughts and feelings ("I think he's sad because he lost his new toy").

The three tips above are the keys to helping you interact and talk to your child in a way that helps him learn about language. You can use these principles during any activity with your child – whether it's eating breakfast, reading a book, or playing with a toy. By letting your child take

the lead during interactions, using language that is one step ahead, and talking about topics that build his thinking and understanding, you will provide your child with exactly what he needs to reach his communication potential.

## References

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2. Fey, M. (2008) The (mis-)use of telegraphic input in child language intervention. *Revista de Logopedia, Foniatría y Audiología*, 28(4), 218-230.