

Strategies to encourage speech and language development in under 5s

Listening

Children need to hear and understand lots of new words before they start to say them and join them together. To help them learn to listen it is useful to reduce background distractions, e.g. TV, electronic games, by turning them off at some points in the day

Wait and observe

This will help you to see what your child is interested in and to know what they might be telling you. It will also give them a chance to start a 'conversation' with you (this may be sounds, gestures, words, phrases or longer sentences).

Handy Tip:

1. Try and be at eye-level with your child so that you show them you are interested in what they are trying to tell you.
2. It may be helpful to count to 10 slowly in your head, to give your child enough time to say something to you.

Comment on what your child is interested in

Make simple comments about what is capturing their interest. Each time leave a pause to give your child time to respond allowing them an opportunity to take a turn in the 'conversation'. Gestures can also be used to help your child understand and remember words e.g. point up when you are going up the stairs and saying 'up'.

Handy Tip

1. Comments should be at a simple language level, eg 'Here's the ball', 'That's a big car'. 'Daddy's washing the car'. Emphasise the important words in your sentence.
2. Pause after you make a comment to give your child a chance to say something.

3. Talk about activities as you are doing them e.g. 'we're walking up the stairs'.
4. Make your voice sound interesting 'I'll huff and I'll puff and I'll bloooooow your house down'.
5. Use more comments than asking questions.

Imitate your child

If it is appropriate, copy what your child says or does. This lets them know that you are interested in what they have to say and gives them a correct model if their speech was unclear, for example, if your child bangs 2 blocks together, you might do the same and say 'bang', or if your child says 'Look tar', you might say 'Look it's a car'.

Handy Tip

1. Remember to pause after imitating your child.

Expand your child's language

To help your child move on to the next stage of language you can try adding 1 or 2 words to what they have said.

Follow these rules for expanding your child's language:

- If they use one word add a bit more stressing the new information, eg your child says 'dog' you could say 'a big dog', or 'the dog is sleeping'.
- If they use two words add a bit more, eg she says 'big doggy' you say 'the big doggy's walking'
- If they use three words add a bit more, eg she says 'big doggy walking' you say 'the big dog is walking to the park'

Handy Tip

1. Remember to pause after adding some words as your child may then copy you!

Interpret

Always try and interpret what your child is trying to tell you and put in words what you think they would say if they could. One word can have many meanings, eg if your child says 'drink' you will need to decide what they mean from the situation, such as 'you want a drink', 'Where's your drink', 'you don't want a drink', 'oh dear you've spilled your drink', 'the cat's drinking'.

Your child may not say a word and instead points to something and makes a sound e.g. your child points at the cupboard. You could then say 'biscuit, you want a biscuit'.

Handy Tip

1. It is better to make a 'best guess' than not to say anything at all.
2. Remember to pause after you have interpreted to let your child have another turn in the 'conversation'.

Offer choices

Your child should be given choices throughout the day, eg 'Do you want apple or banana?' Then leave a long pause for them to respond. Giving choices can be useful to encourage your child to say a word if they have just pointed or made a sound. However, if they still do not say the word, say it for them.

Handy Tip

1. When giving a choice if you know what your child will choose then put this at the end of the sentence e.g. 'do you want water or milk?'
2. Giving a choice may also solve some conflicts, eg if your child refuses to put a hat on you could give them a choice, eg 'do you want a blue hat or a red hat?' This gives your child an element of choice whilst you still get what you want!

Give a reason to communicate

Make sure your child has a reason to communicate with you. You could try some of the following:

- Show your child something interesting, new or something they don't recognise. Wait for them to start communicating to you about it before you say something.

- You could try putting something they want visible but out of reach so that they need to ask for it, eg they have a car mat but the cars are in a box out of reach. If your child points or makes a sound, respond with words they would say if they could, eg 'car', 'want car'.
- You could give parts of a puzzle, toy or jigsaw a bit at a time. If your child indicates they want some more, model (or sign) more or more jigsaw.
- Do something silly or unusual and wait for your child to send you a message, either verbal or non-verbal, eg put a shoe on the wrong foot.

Targeted vocabulary

It may be helpful to target specific day to day vocabulary that your child will find motivating and useful to say. These words should be reinforced through different activities and by lots of repetition of the word at different times. Your child should not be asked to say the words but be within situations where they hear the word frequently. For example, sharing books, enjoying nursery rhymes, games and everyday activities such as shopping, eating, washing.

Handy Tip

1. Encourage action words, eg 'wash', as well as naming words, eg 'book'.
2. It is sometimes useful to isolate specific words at the end of a sentence to provide a good model of the word, eg " Open the bag (pause briefly) open".
3. Remember to pause!

Strategies taken from The Hanen Centre.
See www.hanen.org for further information

For further advice and information, please contact:
Speech and Language Therapy on 0151 514 2334

If you would like this information in another format or language, please contact the Your Experience Team on freephone 0800 694 5530. Alternatively you can email wcnt.yourexp@nhs.net

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