

Talk, Talk, Talk To Give Your Child The Best Start

By Zara Humphry

As parents, you are the first and foremost source of your child's speech and language development.

Studies show that children who are frequently read and spoken to during early childhood will have larger vocabularies and better grammar than those who do not have these experiences. Vocabulary levels are a strong predictor of later literacy skills. Help your child to get the best start by exposing them to a large range of vocabulary and language models through everyday routines, life experiences, playing, and books. Learning language is fun and can easily fit in with the busy lives that we lead.

So to powerfully impact with your child talk, talk, talk...

Top tips when talking with your child

» **Get down to your child's level.**

Engage their attention first before speaking. Young children find it difficult to listen and do activities at the same time. Saying their name first encourages them to listen. If you have any concerns regarding your child's hearing get it tested.

» **Make sure your child can easily see you.** Being able to see you facilitates eye contact, a shared focus and means they can also pick up on facial expressions, lip patterns and other important non-verbal information. These all form a large part of communication.

» **Let your child choose the toy and how it is used.** By decreasing directiveness as a parent, it can increase your child's attention and focus of play. It also allows for experimentation and learning. Use everyday routines (e.g. story time, bath time, going to the shops etc.) as opportunities to hear language repeatedly and ensure new language is used in a variety of situations.

» **Choose a language level close to your child's.** Don't go with where you think their age group should be. If your child isn't using words then use single words/short phrases.

» **Use non-verbal communication.** For example natural gestures support language understanding and act as a bridge towards the spoken word.

» **Develop balanced conversations by slowing down and pausing.** Give your child time to process information. Talk at a gentle but natural pace, use pauses to encourage your child to join in and you can begin to develop balanced conversations. If your child stumbles on words maintain eye contact and allow them time to talk.

» **Positive acknowledgment is the most powerful form of correction.** Repeat what your child says, to affirm their communication. Use this as an opportunity to model the correct speech. For example:

Child: "tar" (car)
Adult: "yes, that is a car"
Child: "I saw 2 mouses..."
Adult: "Oh, you saw two mice..."

Correcting too frequently could make your child feel anxious.

» **Give them choices.** Choice-making offers a chance to hear language and also use language beyond yes/no in response to questions (e.g. "Do you want the purple hat or dark blue hat?"). If they only point to an object then label it as you give it to them.

» **Expand on your child's language** so that they learn to extend their language. For example:

Child: "Look dog there"
Adult: "Yes, the dog is under the tree"
Child: "I like bear"
Adult: "I like your bear because he's soft"

» **Be the commentator to your child's experiences.** Help your child to absorb language by providing a running commentary on what your child is doing. Decrease pressure on your child by avoiding questions. If you ask questions make sure the intention is to seek new information.

» **Lose the dummy.** Dummies certainly have their place, but they can have a significant negative impact on speech development if used frequently (e.g. daytime) after the developmental age of 6 months.

» **Bilingualism is an advantage and does not cause communication disorders.** When English is an additional language keep talking your home language with your child to give them a strong foundation for learning other languages.

Developmental milestones provide useful guidance by offering approximate ages and stages. However, they can cause unnecessary anxiety. Remember every child is individual and they don't grow up at the same pace. If you have any concerns then contact a Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) to discuss this further.



Useful websites:

www.ican.org.uk
www.talkingpoint.org.uk
www.helpwithtalking.com (helps find local Independent SLTs)

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