

Creating Opportunities to Communicate

There are also many fun activities to help maximize early communication skills. Understanding of language generally develops before expressive language skills so do not underestimate the importance of repetition. Children need to hear words many times in meaningful contexts in order to gain enough understanding to have a go at using the words themselves.

Symbolic Noises

Symbolic noises are sounds that represent the words that they refer to and are often easier to produce than the words they relate to i.e. “choo choo”- train, “moo”- cow. Animal noises and transport or vehicle noises are often very fun and meaningful for children. These are fun sounds that you can incorporate when playing games or looking at books. They encourage vocalization, imitation, early vocabulary development and understanding of routine language. Have fun playing around with symbolic noises as you play with toy figures, read books and when you’re out and about. You can model the relevant vocabulary at the same time as you use the symbolic sound (e.g. “the cow says moo”) so that the child is learning the real word associated with the symbolic sound. Symbolic sounds much easier for the child to imitate and create lots of good interaction when used within play. They are important for developing understanding and use of language as well as speech sound development.

Simple Play Routines

Children learn through repetition, and simple play routines are a fun way to develop early routine language. Ready, Steady, Go games are fun and versatile and can be created with a focus on the child’s interests. The idea is that the child learns the routine of using sounds to initiate something, i.e. blow some air into a balloon and say “ready...steady....GO!” then let the balloon go. After several repetitions of the same routine, start by saying “ready....steady....” then pause and see if your child will initiate “Go”. You can do this routine with any activity, but start with something that is particularly motivating to your child like bubbles, pushing them on a swing or throwing a ball etc.

Communication temptations

Create situations where your child is motivated to communicate because it means they will get something they want. It doesn't matter if they do not pronounce words clearly, as long as they make an attempt at communicating. The goal is to encourage the child to use voice/sign/gesture to initiate and request. For example:

1. Put your child's favourite drink or snack in sight but out of reach, and wait for them to attempt to communicate with a vocalization, word, sign or gesture. As soon as they indicate, model and give the object.

2. Play with a toy that requires winding up, or something that needs to be opened by an adult. Demonstrate using the object, then stop and wait for the child to attempt to communicate to request that you wind it up again or open it for them to have a turn.

With all of these examples, if your child is reaching for the object, appears to be getting frustrated, you can prompt by modelling what you would like them to say i.e. “please”, “open” or “help” or simply the name of the object. If you are using signing to support understanding, then sign along with any verbal prompts and then wait to give your child a chance to make their request. The idea is that the reward is being successful at communicating a request so give as much help as you can at first to ensure that your child is successful as that is the best way to understand that basic communication exchange which is communicating something in order to get something. Remember to respond to all attempts at communication, not just spoken words.

Offering Choices

Offering choices is a powerful tool that supports early communication attempts. Offer choices in as many situations as you can think of and wait for a response. You can do this with food, drink, favourite toys, anything that is visual to start with so that the choice is very clear then moving to just a verbal choice if your child does not require the visual reinforcement for the 2 items in that choice. With new or unfamiliar words, it is always best to have visual reinforcement of the objects being in view. Initially you can accept just pointing or reaching towards the choice, but as your child progresses, pause and wait for a communicative attempt. Offer motivating and non-motivating items to encourage your child to request the motivating item. If the child does not attempt to communicate, give them the non-motivating item and wait for their response. Then you have the chance to offer the choice again if they reject the item you offered. Remember to reward any communication attempt while prompting to give the maximum communication you know they can give.

Songs and Nursery Rhymes

Sing familiar nursery rhymes and songs to your child. Songs that involve actions are particularly motivating. When your child is familiar with a song you can start to sing it but stop before you say the last word or line and see if your child automatically fills in the gap with the word or action. Have games or songs around routines such as bath-time or bedtime and keep these the same until your child is familiar with them. Once they are familiar with the songs, wait for the child to initiate parts of the routine or sing a song, or sing it and stop before the end to see if they will finish it themselves.

Make deliberate mistakes

Deliberately make a silly mistake and wait for your child to comment on it. This can be done by naming something incorrectly or asking your child to fetch something that doesn't exist or is silly. They often find it hard to resist the temptation to correct you.