



# Welcome to...

## WE CAN TALK

Tips for enhancing your child's speech and language (continued)

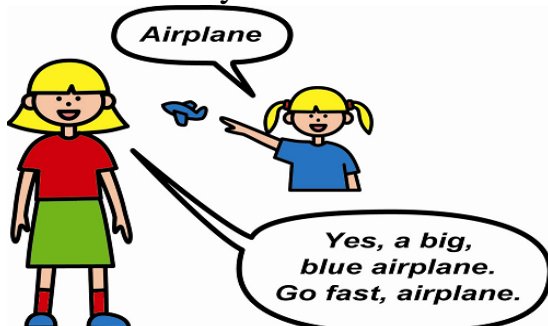
### The fifth technique in WE CAN TALK

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#### **N - Notice when your child initiates communication. Respond and add to it.**

Imagine this scenario. You come home from a very hectic day at work and tell your spouse, "I had the worst day today. Our computers shut down for over three hours, and we had tons of angry customers. One yelled at me for 10 minutes." Your spouse then responds by saying, "What's for dinner?" How would that make you feel if your significant other gave no acknowledgment of what you just said? I suspect it would make you feel angry or hurt. Children could feel the same way if we did not notice their communication attempts.

One of the greatest successes is when your child initiates verbally or even non-verbally to **get his needs met**. These attempts to initiate might include **getting other people's attention, commenting about what he sees, requesting or asking for what he wants, greeting others, and protesting to indicate he doesn't want something**. In the hustle and bustle of our daily lives, though, it's easy to sometimes miss our children's communication attempts, especially those children who are a bit more subtle in their approach. This technique will cover two basic areas: 1. How to respond when your child initiates communication, and 2. How to teach your child to initiate more. Child-initiated language is your ultimate goal, so it is very important to wholeheartedly embrace the fifth technique:



**N - Notice when your child initiates communication. Respond and add to it.**

## **Part 1 - How to respond when your child initiates communication**

### **When your child initiates GESTURES to communicate**

When your child doesn't initiate with words but uses gestures instead, respond by saying a word or short phrase that goes with the gesture he just did. For example, if he pulls you and wants you to stand up, say the words "Go, go, go," "Up, up, up," or "Mommy get up," as he is pulling you. If he points to a snack in the cupboard, you could say, "Do you want a cookie?" Then make a gesture of using a cookie cutter motion on your hand while you say, "Cookie, cookie, cookie please." Wait to see his reaction to what you said and watch if he attempts to imitate the gesture or words you modeled for him. If he doesn't, you could also take his hands to help him imitate the gesture or sign.

Remember that any behavior, whether it be crying, screaming, gesturing, or saying words, is communicating something. If you feel it is directed to people, those communication attempts are very powerful and can be shaped into more functional communication.

Whatever he does to initiate communication, always ask yourself these questions. How can I respond to what he just gestured? What can I say and do to give him new information? How can I say words to make them exciting and motivating for him to try to say?

### **When your child initiates WORDS to communicate**

How exciting! Let's say your child just initiated the word "juice" to get something to drink. What should you do and say in response to what he just said? The biggest compliment you could ever give him is to imitate what he said back to him. That will affirm what he is saying as well as show him that you are interested in the content of what he is saying and not how he said it. As you imitate the word he said, you can also put that word in a simple sentence. You could say, "Oh, do you want juice?" or "You want juice!" Be sure to try to get down to your child's level and get eye contact with him as much as possible. This is especially important for children who have more difficulty achieving eye contact. They need frequent rehearsal to develop that skill of looking at people.

Next, add something to what he just said. You could add a descriptive word such as, "You like apple juice, don't you?" Perhaps try a choice question such as, "Do you want orange juice or apple juice?" Maybe use your exaggerated gestures and voice to say, "MMMMM. Yummy, yummy apple juice." At times, after saying an exciting

phrase like that, wait to see if he will say it. Did you say it in such a way that it motivated him to try to say it? If he does not attempt to say the words, you could also say, “Your turn,” to encourage him.

The words you add are really less important than simply responding. Responding is crucial. Your great parent instincts will guide you on what to say next, and you can be confident that you will say something that helps your child learn new words to try.

## **PART 2 - How to teach your child to do more initiating**

As stated earlier, children initiate communication for a variety of reasons: sometimes to request something, other times to get someone to look at something, sometimes to greet others, sometimes to initiate a social game or activity, and sometimes to protest and indicate that they don't want something. Some children seem to communicate with others only to request something, and rarely use gestures or words just for the purpose of interacting with people. When thinking about teaching your child to do more initiating, it is important to think of all of the different reasons your child might be excited to communicate. If he's getting stuck on just requesting all the time, maybe you could also help him to use his words to socialize with another adult or a sibling. This section will give suggestions to teach your child to initiate communication not just to request things, but also to give and show objects to others.

There are many reasons why a child may not initiate communication with others. Some children are very passive and don't seem to have a lot of needs. They don't appear to desire the interaction with others. For those children, we need to show them that communicating with others is fun. We need to expose them to many activities and objects with the goal of finding things that are fun and that motivate them to request.

Other children have many desires but lack the skills to express those desires to others. Some children may have trouble getting their thoughts and desires out in words, so they find a way to get what they want without any help from others. Some may look like they prefer to play in isolation. The other possible reason for children lacking the ability to initiate is that some caregivers may anticipate their child's needs to the point that the child doesn't even have a chance to initiate on his own. Whatever the reason, the “Be the Messenger” technique may be helpful in teaching your child skills for initiating communication with others.

### **“Be the Messenger” technique - Teaching your child to comment and be social with others**

To teach children to be social communicators, not only to get their needs met but to be interactive with others, there is a hierarchy of skills to teach and practice. These techniques below are cues, and our hope is to gradually eliminate the need to remind your child to participate in each of these tasks. The more you practice them, the more likely your child will be to initiate on his own.

1. “Give it to me,” or “Give it to (name of another person).” This teaches sharing with others and getting others to notice objects that are of interest to your child. It also teaches your child to give objects to get his needs met. Encourage this skill during snack time by asking him to share a cracker with you or someone else. You could also put small objects that he really loves in plastic containers with the lids closed tightly so he has to give you the container in order to get it open.  
When you are playing with toys such as blocks with your child, occasionally ask him to “Give a block to Daddy.” Being willing to include others in play by giving objects is an important step in drawing others into a child’s world.
2. “Show it to \_\_\_\_\_.” This skill teaches children to include others in their world by proudly showing things to people. With any toy your child enjoys, practice including other people by asking your child to show it to another person. You can also do this same technique with any artwork your child has done, any new clothes, etc. At first you would teach the command directly by saying, “Show it to \_\_\_,” but gradually you want to teach a child to do this skill by giving more subtle commands. Try reminders like, “I bet Daddy would like to see your picture,” or “Who do you want to show your picture to?” This whole skill of “showing” things to people is the classic “show and tell” that children experience when they go to preschool programs. It’s good to practice this skill at home, too. It is also important to notice if your child is looking at the person as well as the object that he is showing. That ability to shift a child’s eye gaze from an object to a person cannot ever be forgotten.
3. “Tell \_\_\_\_\_.” This helps a child learn to initiate communication with other people in many different ways, including commenting about what they see, sharing about what they are doing, telling people what they need, and even greeting others. Use this technique during play time and during many other daily activities. When playing with something like cars, give your child a direction such as, “Tell dad it’s a car.” If he is able to understand that command, gradually decrease the level of cuing by saying, “Tell dad what that is.” You can also implement greetings with this technique by saying, “Tell Dad ‘Bye.’”

Gradually decrease that cuing as well by asking, “Dad is leaving. What do you say?” If your child is working on short phrases, you could cue your child to call Dad to dinner by saying, “Tell Dad, ‘Time to eat!’” With this technique, you give your child as much information as he needs to be successful in communicating. At first, you wouldn’t be able to say a more open-ended sentence like, “Tell Dad what we did today.” You may have to be more specific, such as, “Tell Dad we went to the store today,” or “Tell Dad where we went today. Tell him, ‘Toy store, Daddy.’”

4. “Ask \_\_\_\_\_.” This skill helps children learn to ask others what they would like. For example, during snack time, you could cue your child to ask others a variety of questions such as, “Ask John if he wants a cookie,” “Ask John if he likes puppies,” or “Ask John if he wants to play.” Depending on how much your child talks and how long his sentences are, you have to adjust what you expect in terms of the length of sentences your child uses. For example, if your child is eating a snack and will be sharing with others, depending on his verbal skills you could say, “Ask John if he wants a cracker,” “Ask John, ‘Do you want a cracker?’” or “Ask John, ‘Cracker, John?’”

These four skills are all cues to teach children different ways to interact with others. Eventually, you want to decrease the cuing required to get children to initiate on their own. The amount of cuing and support is what you need to think about. How we set up the environment and structure a task depends on how your child is currently communicating and how much we need to intervene to have him be socially successful.

**Here are some other suggestions for practicing the art of initiating.**

### **Teaching commenting and increasing verbal creativity while playing with your child and his favorite toys**

When children do not initiate language with others, very often those same children are quiet while playing with their toys. They also may show decreased imagination with their toys. During a recent therapy session with one of my students, we were playing with his favorite toys: cars. Very typically, he is quiet when playing with them, and tends to put them in a line. This time I decided to start talking about other options such as going to the store and to the swimming pool in our cars. We parked our cars in the pretend parking lots, and I began to talk to my little friend about the things we could buy in the store. I gave him choice questions such as, “Should we buy milk or juice?” when he was unable to come up with any things to buy. I also

asked him to **tell** his mom that we were going to the store and **tell** her that we were buying some juice. I asked him to **show** his favorite car to his mother. I encouraged him to **ask** his mom if she wanted a car. I talked to his mom about practicing different imaginative play options throughout the week with the hopes of increasing the amount of talking he would do while playing. Two weeks later, the difference in this little boy's language was amazing. He was talking about his cars, discussing where he was going in his cars, and what he was going to do when he parked his car. The more options you give a child to think about, the more he has to say.

### **Teaching your child to greet and compliment**

Teach your child to greet others, to give compliments, to say "thank you," and to say "please." The same need for cuing depends on where your child is currently functioning in these skill areas. Let's use the example of waving and saying, "Bye." If your child is not yet waving or saying, "Bye," you can start by giving the direction, "Say 'Bye bye,'" taking his hand, and teaching him how to wave. If he can wave to people, but doesn't do it without being told to do so, start by decreasing the amount of cuing by just asking the question, "John is going bye bye. What do you tell him?" See if your child can then respond without being told exactly what to do. Or you may hold your hand up as a visual cue to start waving. You can also set up a role playing situation by playing "Hi and Bye" behind a door in your house. Put a stuffed animal or another person on the other side of the door and knock. Open the door and practice saying "Hi" and then "Bye." Practice it multiple times.

### **Cues**

Use as few cues as necessary to help your child be successful with initiating. I encourage parents to be clueless and wait a bit for your child to initiate, but never so much that your child gets too frustrated or walks away disinterested. If you sense what your child wants, see if he can convey it independently. If he cannot, you may want to ask a question such as, "What do you want?" or "What do you say?" If he cannot answer the question, you may want to try another level of cuing by holding up two objects and giving a choice by saying, "Do you want \_\_\_\_\_ or \_\_\_\_\_?" If he still is not able to respond, hold the object you think he wants within his reach. If he reaches for it, that may be the time to reach for his hand, put the object in his hand, put his hand up to your face, and then say the word in an enticing way. The level of cuing necessary is all related to how your child is currently communicating.

### **How does your child initiate language?**

Let's analyze how your child initiates communication with others. In what ways does your child usually communicate? Does he request certain objects, show you objects, comment, greet, or protest? Give examples for each.

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Now think about what types of situations you could practice with your child to improve his desire to initiate communication with others. Think of every social situation from asking for food from the refrigerator, to going to a restaurant, to playing with toys. Think about how you can teach your child a more sophisticated way of getting his needs met and for giving, showing, telling, and asking about his world.

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### **Building on Techniques 1 through 5**

Of all of the techniques, perhaps noticing your child's initiated language may be the most important no matter how small his attempts are. When you see these attempts, give eye contact, a smile, a verbal acknowledgment, and then add to what he said by attaching another word or phrase to it. Children who begin to initiate communication with others are truly understanding the power of it all. Let's move on to Technique Number 6.