



Welcome to...

WE CAN TALK

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

The third technique in WE CAN TALK

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C – Comment about what you and your child are doing, seeing, and enjoying.

“Commenting” is for all children, from the very verbal ones to the silent observers. There are some children who just won't imitate or attempt to say words for whatever reason. Parents may have tried all of the exaggeration and enticement with their gestures and voice, and their child is still not responding vocally. There are other children who are beginning to respond to their parents' exaggeration and enticement techniques, but are imitating and attempting to say words inconsistently. Whether your child is quiet, occasionally imitating, or very verbal, you may want to change your focus and put your energy into this technique. Concentrate on one thing – putting words and knowledge into your child's head. Don't worry about the imitation or the responding right now. Just give your child vocabulary and descriptions of what he is doing, seeing and enjoying.

Research has found that adults tend to speak less often and also more simply to children who have limited verbal skills. Because these “quiet” children don't respond in the same way that other children do, our tendency is to speak less as well. It's difficult to have a conversation with yourself, so as a result we, too, become quiet. But children need to hear words and descriptions about their world, even if they cannot say the words themselves. A phenomenal study by Hart and Risley (1999, *The Social World of Children Learning to Talk*) showed that children from language-rich environments heard 2,100 words per hour, whereas the contrast of 600 words per minute occurred in homes that were not rich in word use. (Language-rich environments exclude words that may be heard on TV, but instead relate only to words used in direct interaction with people.) These results also directly correlated with children who became stronger readers.

Children need to know the richness of words. As parents, we need to consciously choose what we are going to do in terms of talking to our children. In addition, we need to make decisions about how much TV watching is acceptable in our homes. We need to believe wholeheartedly that the time we take for our children at a young age will have a direct effect on our children's success later in school and in life. All children, regardless of verbal ability, need to be enriched with this technique.



C – Comment about what you and your child are doing, seeing, and enjoying.

Why is commenting so important? Children need to understand the words we say in order for them to finally say the words. Remember that those children who have an understanding of literally thousands of words are also the children who are more equipped to become strong readers.

Talk about the objects in your child's world. Take your child's lead and begin talking about the things your child loves and is doing. When your child is playing with a toy or participating in a daily routine like getting dressed, eating, or taking a bath, name all of the objects. Vary how you name an object. For example, a car can also be a vehicle or an automobile. Also begin naming the parts to the objects. You can point out the doors, wipers, lights, wheels, and trunk of the car. The object names you can use are endless.

Repeat, repeat, repeat. Think about what words would be important for your child to understand and learn to say. Choose several words and repeat them frequently. For example, if you recently got a new puppy, think of ways to say "puppy" at least five to ten times in a matter of 1-2 minutes. Write down some of the things you could say about a puppy. Remember to use the word "puppy" at least five times, ie – See the puppy? That puppy is little. He says "woof woof."

This exercise may seem silly, but with children showing speech and language delay and also normally developing children, you may want to do exactly that during your daily routines – specifically choose certain words and use them multiple times during your interaction with your child. Frequent repetition and focus on specific words was studied by Girolametto, Pearce, and Weitzman and presented in the *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research*, Dec. 1996, in an article entitled *Interactive Focused Stimulation for Toddlers With Expressive Vocabulary Delays*. The results were very positive in terms of developing stronger vocabularies in children.

When my youngest child was about 3 years old, I remember him having a very hard time learning pronouns like “he” and “she.” He frequently replaced them with “him” and “her.” I also remember making a conscious decision one day to focus my language on those pronouns while I played with him using his toy farm set. I produced sentences like, “He is walking to his tractor. Yes he is. He loves his tractor. He is getting in. Will he go for a ride? I think he will.” Within a couple of days, my son had his pronouns straight. Focused language stimulation is an excellent tool to use, and I know it works. But I had to think about doing it – even for a speech-language pathologist, I didn’t always analyze what I said to my own children.

Talk about actions. Fill your child’s vocabulary with action words that describe what he is doing and what he sees others are doing. Talking about action words also goes hand in hand with developing imaginative play, a crucial developmental skill. For example, when playing with a stuffed animal like a puppy, make him jump, run, eat, hide, and sleep. Say the words as you act them out with the puppy. You can also vary the tenses of the action words you say. Here are some examples for one action word: “Let’s jump! Puppy is jumping. Do you like to jump? Let’s all jump together. We jumped! We’ll jump again later.”

Talk about descriptions of words. There are so many ways you can describe objects, including size, shape, color, and location. To describe a car, you could use words such as big, little, enormous, noisy, loud, quiet, long, short, pretty, its color, and its location (in the garage). Be creative in the words you use to describe it. If you choose a descriptive word, remember to use it at least five to ten times within a matter of a few minutes.

What if my child isn’t paying any attention to me when I talk? There will be times when you will feel like your child is not listening at all. That’s fairly typical. Keep talking anyway, because you may never know when your child is truly listening but just can’t show it. If you notice, though, that your child is in a different world

most of the time, then concentrate on being more enticing with your gestures and words. Also focus on any activity that your child loves doing with you so you can keep him engaged. Being engaged with you is crucial, and during those times your child will comprehend the words you say more easily.

Remember to slow down. Even though you want to put lots of information in your child's brain, don't go to the races with your speaking rate. Slow it down to help your child absorb all of the words you are saying.

How complicated should I get with my words? There are two ways to answer this question. One possible solution is to produce words or phrases that are within a child's ability to imitate so that your child starts to produce some of those words. The other approach is to provide your child with a rich vocabulary, more complex than what your child can say. By doing the latter, you are increasing your child's comprehension skills even though your child's ability to say the words has not kept up. The answer is **balance**. Give both simple words and verbal models that your child can imitate, and also give words and phrases that are above your child's ability to produce. Your child needs both. Here is an example. If your goal is to get your child to imitate what you are saying, then keep your words and phrases short. When you are loading the dishwasher you could say "cup in" or "wash the cup" with an enticing voice and exaggerated movement. On the other hand, if your goal is to provide your child with rich language, in this same situation you could say "I'm putting your blue cup in the dishwasher," or "I'm washing the sippy cup with warm water."

Choose a daily routine where you will consciously think about all of the words you can teach your child. Think about object names, action words, and descriptions. Write down some of the words you can say during that activity.

Now let's think about combining all of the techniques you have learned so far. As you **comment** about your child's world and experiences, don't forget to **wonder, wait, and then watch** your child as he makes attempts at communicating. Give your child time to respond to the words you say. Also think about how you might **exaggerate your words and gestures** to encourage imitation. You have completed three techniques. Let's move on to the fourth technique.