

15 Ways to Encourage Expressive Speech and Language Skills

Adapted from "Early Intervention Support, Child Development, Parent Routines"



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1. Modeling- first and foremost, be a good speech model for your child. Children need to hear speech in order to imitate speech. During play and daily routines always talk to your child about what you are doing. For example, "you are putting your arms in to your shirt" or "mommy is cooking your breakfast." If your child makes an attempt at a word, remember most young children cannot pronounce many words correctly and that is OK. If your child says "ba" for "ball" consistently, this is his word for ball. Make sure you always pronounce it correctly with the L sound on the end so he hears it correctly. Many parents revert to baby talk by imitating their child's speech calling a bottle "Baba" or a blanket "bankey" which does not help a child here or learn the correct pronunciation of words.

2. Expansion- when your child labels or says a single word, always expand on that word so your child hears it in a sentence. For example, if your child says "baby" you can say "the baby is sleeping," or if your child says "more" you can state "you want more juice."

3. Imitation- young children love to imitate. Start by imitating something that your child already does, especially something fun or silly, like making faces or unusual sounds. Move to the imitation of new gestures by singing songs like "wheels on the bus" or imitation of environmental or animal sounds such as "whee," "zoom" "beep beep", "Ding Dong" "oh, no" "moo," "woof", "meow."

4. Choices- always give choices during meal and play time when possible to encourage your child to use a gesture or vocalization to communicate his wants or needs. For example, if your child points toward the kitchen when he is hungry, give him a choice by holding up his cup and then showing him the milk and juice and asking "are you thirsty?" "Do you want milk or juice?"

5. Prompting- you can prompt by using sounds, gestures or choices. For example, if you want a child to tell you "more" you can first show him the sign for more as a prompt. You can also prompt by saying an initial sound of a word to give your child a boost, for example if you have heard your child previously say milk you can say "mmmm" as a prompt.



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6. Parallel talk– when you are playing with your child or your child is eating, bathing, etc, talk to him about what he is doing. For example, “you are building a big tower!” “you stacked five blocks!” “One fell down!” or “you are eating your fruit. Those bananas are yummy! Chew Chew Chew. Bananas are slippery.”

7. Waiting/ withholding– this is the best to do when you know your child had already has a word or sign and is not using it. First, always give your child time to respond before giving him the desired object or food. He may just need the extra time to respond. Or withhold the child's desired object or food until he uses the word or sign for it.

8. Sign Language– supplement speech by using signs paired with words. Signs can help alleviate a child's frustration and give him a way to communicate his wants and needs.

9. Picture Communication– you can use pictures of objects and activities so that your child can point to the objects he wants. For example, make your child a communication book of daily routines by using digital pictures placed into a small photo album, or cut out pictures of foods from a magazine, cover with contact paper and place magnetic tape on the back so he can make choices by handing the picture to you.

10. Questioning – ask open-ended questions instead of always yes or no questions. Open-ended questions are used to start a conversation with your child. For example, “where is daddy?” or what do you want for lunch?” or “or who is coming home soon?”. If your child doesn't answer you can answer for him by saying “daddy is at work” “or “grandma is coming home soon!”



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11. Novelty – bring something new or unexpected into a child's play or daily routine to elicit conversation. For example, when playing with farm animals make the cow say “woof woof” and see if your child notices and comments on it. When it is time to brush teeth, hand him a comb and see what he says. If your child doesn't comment you can point it out and say “we don't use a comb to brush her teeth, we use a toothbrush!”

12. Forgetting– forget things on purpose and see if your child remembers or comments. For example, if your child wants milk, place his cup on the table and the milk within reach, but don't pour the milk. When singing a song sing “twinkle twinkle little_____” and forget to say “star.” See if your child makes an attempt to fill in the forgotten word.

13. Self-talk– this is something parents to do all the time. Talk about everything and anything you are doing. “Mommy is doing the laundry. I am folding your red shirts”. Or “I am chopping carrots. We are going to have a salad with carrots and lettuce and cucumbers.”

14. Paraphrase– use simple language with toddlers instead of lengthy explanations or directions. Instead of saying “you need to put on your coat because it's cold outside and we're going to grandmas house,” simply say “put on your coat.” Using simpler language when asking children to complete a task or follow direction works best.

15. Place things out of the child reach– instead of always having your child sippy cup on the coffee table, put it within your child's sight, but out of his reach so he needs to gesture or verbalize that he wants it. You can do the same with favorite toys.