

How to Listen So That Your Toddler Can Talk

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This is not the post I thought I was going to write. I set out to write about sneaky tricks to encourage talking (temptation tasks, turn taking, adding language: it was going to be a masterpiece), but as the introduction section became two, and then three, and then four, and then five paragraphs long, I realized that perhaps I was getting ahead of myself. Before you start encouraging talking, you have to learn to listen. This is how.

Follow Your Child's Lead

Many of us have a secret, perhaps deeply buried agenda when interacting with a child. Though this may sound sinister, I suspect that you will recognize yourself in this simple example. You sit on the floor to play with your child (first of all, good job on that). You see the shape sorter and think "what a great opportunity to teach Maddy about shapes" (again, good job!). However Maddy's eyes go to the ball across the room and she begins to reach for it. You show her a square, "Look Maddy, it's a square, where does the square go?"

SCREEEEEEEECH!! Uh oh. The well-intentioned language train has been derailed. At this point Maddy has to split her attention between the shapes (which she frankly could take or leave at this point) and the ball (which she currently thinks is awesome). She has to process the shape language that you are providing while taking in information about the ball, which she likes, and the square that you have (very lovingly) shoved in her face. System overload!! Language not learned. Instead, see her eye gaze go to the ball and follow her lead. "Look, a ball!" Ah ha, Maddy thinks, this awesome thing must be a ball! Language learned. Let your child use the full power of his or her developing mental capacity on objects that are of high interest in the moment. And if you really can't let go of the shape thing, I suppose that you can mention that the ball is round.

OWL (Observe – Wait – Listen)

In order to follow your child's lead you have to know what he or she is interested in. Sometimes as adults we like to jump in and provide lots and lots of information, but children are processing things at their own pace, and they can be subtle so we must be tuned in. The first step is to get close to your child- in a position to interact- and quietly OBSERVE his or her body language: actions, gestures, facial expressions. Look where she is looking. Follow her gesture. Then WAIT for her to communicate.

And OHHHHH, is this a TRICKY one. Even after all these years of working with toddlers, I still sometimes count in my head 1-2-3-4-5 to make sure I am pausing long enough. In an unreasonable moment you may even wonder why your two year old can't just come up with something to say already. I mean, we are on a schedule here. I really want to facilitate your language learning, but

counting to five seems like a really long time when we have to leave in five minutes to pick dad up from the train station and I haven't even changed your diaper yet and you just took off your shoes. Ahem. My point is that often we are not as good at waiting as we think we are. But you have a job to do. As you wait, stop talking and lead forward expectantly, showing your child that you are ready to receive the message when they are ready to send it to you. It takes your new communicator time to put together what he or she wants to convey.

And then, LISTEN. Depending on where your child is in terms of development, their communication will look different. It may be a gesture, or a consonant, or a word approximation. Use your understanding of your child and context clues to find out what your child is trying to tell you. I can't take credit for the wonderful acronym "OWL". It was coined by The Hanen Center (<http://www.hanen.org/>), which is a wonderful language development resource.

Curb the Desire to Test Your Toddler

"What shape is that?" "What color is that?" "Say 'ball,'" "Say 'dog,'" "Say 'hi.'"

Oh, the pressure. There is nothing wrong with asking questions and there is nothing wrong with giving directions, but for goodness sake stop giving your poor little two year old one fill-in-the-blank test after another. Be aware that testing can backfire. When you think about it, the child really needs to hear the ANSWER, not the question. The question does not give any new information. It does not introduce a new vocabulary word. In some cases this kind of question or command can increase pressure and anxiety (for both the child and the parent), and it can be a real conversation stopper if the child is taken aback or doesn't know the answer. Oops.

It is better to listen and build your questions and directions around the abilities of your child. I think that the difference between testing questions and, um, GOOD questions is that testing questions are contrived. Let me explain. You know that the shape is a triangle. You don't need to ask your two year old. If you suspect she doesn't know, maybe you should tell her. If you just want her to say triangle, YOU say triangle so that she can repeat it. Or give her a choice between a circle and a triangle and wait for her to say the word to tell you which one she wants. She will say it when she is able to.

On the other hand, there are some valid questions that should not be shied away from. Maybe you want to know if she would like to eat, so you ask her the yes/no question "Are you hungry?" That is a good question. You want her to help pick out her outfit so you ask her, "Do you want to wear the blue shirt or the pink shirt?" You can't find her favorite stuffed animal so you ask her where it is. These are all valid questions, and all questions that are helpful as her receptive language develops. You also want to keep in mind your child's abilities and developmental level. Do not ask a one month old where her socks are. You will be disappointed.

And now you see why I had to make this a separate blog post. Listening is essential for language development and a lot more difficult than we sometimes think. But it is a prerequisite to successfully implementing any sneaky language stimulation strategy. So I advise that you work hard to master these techniques so that you are a pro when the advanced placement sneaky language technique blog comes along.

This post by Teresa was originally written for [Child Development Club](#) and was also featured [here](#).