

Tips for Early Communicators

Be face to face

What is it? Getting on your child's level (or bringing them to yours!) Try to sit in front of them so they can see your face and mouth.

Why do it? Helps encourage interaction. Lets them see facial expressions which can help social communication and makes communication more fun. Lets them see how to make speech sounds, and gives them a model to try themselves.

Let them "start" a conversation

What is it? Waiting expectantly, providing enticing toys/books/games. Try not to say anything until your child indicates communication first. Be patient, quiet and keep a keen eye on your child...their communication can be as small as eye contact (from you to an object and back), pointing, grabbing/showing, a babble, a word, phrase or as big as a sentence, depending on the level they're at! Reluctant communicator? Try a gasp/point/"wow" yourself to encourage their attention. Make a small comment if you need to, then wait for their "turn" (as above).

Why do it? Shows you what they're interested in...which will be what they're more willing to "talk" about! Gives them an opportunity to be a participant in your interaction. Taking turns (even small ones) helps them practice the back-and-forth of typical conversations.

Respond on "topic"

What is it? Look/listen closely to what your child has communicated about (eye gaze, point, sound, word etc). Pay attention to exactly where they were looking/pointing, or what sounds/words they used. Then respond to affirm what they "said"; Repeat their word, or use a word they were likely trying to use, or could have used, as close to what you think they were trying to "say".

Why do it? You may *think* they were talking about the truck, but maybe it was the truck's wheel! Kids can be specific too...and this is where their attention is, what they're interested in talking about! So it's important to affirm their words or give them the closest model to what they were trying to attempt.

Model and Expand as needed

What is it? Provide a model (use a word they used or tried/could have used) but keep it grammatical, and short. Depending on their level, model one step ahead. No words yet? Give them single words (with endings, like plurals, -ing, -ed, etc. as applicable), or up to 2-3 if needed. Child using single words? Repeat their word and add a short phrase with 2-3 words to expand (don't leave out verbs, possessives, and other little words like "Daddy is jumping" and "Look! Daddy's boots!") When modelling or expanding, correct any omissions of grammar elements ("daddy boot!" -> "daddy's boot! You're right!") But no need to point out an error or say "no"; keep it positive and just model!

Why do it? Modelling/expanding gives an example of how to talk. Words your child can use at another time, or try repeating in this conversation.

Use a variety of words

What is it? Especially when expanding on what your child has said, try using all kinds of words. Nouns are common in English, but don't forget action words (verbs), describing words (adjectives/adverbs), location words (prepositions) and other fun words like animal noises, or "bang/boom!"

Why do it? Helps keep interest and expands their vocabulary (even before they speak, they're building a "receptive" (understanding) vocabulary!) Giving them more words than just noun labels gives them a good repertoire to pick from when they start *combining* words. ("Mommy up!", "block yellow", "more apple" "daddy jump"!)

Keep it fun

What is it? Try to model without directly "correcting", use funny words and sounds, any toy can start a conversation, people games (peek-a-boo, pat-a-cake) can be the most fun! Go with the flow and follow their lead, trying to keep things fun and no pressure. Avoid too many questions, or constant labeling of objects for your child. Keep turn-taking and try *commenting* on your turns.

Why do it? Interactions will last longer when you're having fun, which gives more time to practice talking! These tips help put less pressure on your child (e.g. being "corrected" or "test-style" questioning) which should encourage rather than discourage them from taking a conversational turn.