



Language-building Tips for Parents of Children Who Have Just Started Talking

These tips are for parents of children who have started to use single words or who have started to put two words together (e.g., “dog” or “Mommy go”). Have fun building your child’s language skills the Hanen way!

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Be face to face with your child

Get down to your child’s physical level whenever possible. When you are face to face with your child, he is likely to communicate more as he sees you are right there with him, interested in what he is doing. It will also help you pick up whatever he is communicating and see what he is interested in. Children love it when adults get right down to their level!

If your child mispronounces a word or uses incorrect grammar, there is no need to correct him

Respond to mispronunciation or incorrect grammar by repeating the word or phrase correctly, and then carrying on with the interaction. For example, if your child says “poon” while pointing to a spoon, respond by saying “Do you need a **spoon**?”, adding special emphasis to the word “spoon” as you say it. There is no need to correct your child or to ask him to say the word again. By letting him hear how the word sounds, without being corrected, your child will feel encouraged and will have all the information he needs to learn the correct word when he is ready.

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Encourage pretending

Once a child begins to use words, we usually see the first attempts at pretend (imaginary) play, which builds language skills. Encourage pretend play by providing simple pretend toys (use realistic, miniature objects, such as toy food and dishes, puppets and stuffed animals, toy people and vehicles, etc). Give her one set of toys at a time (e.g., food and dishes) and watch to see how she uses them. Then join in the play, but follow her lead, doing what she’s doing (avoid telling her what to do). Once in a while, add a new pretend idea to the play by demonstrating a simple action with the toys (e.g., blowing on a cup of “tea” because it is too hot). Then wait to see how she responds.

When in doubt, don’t hesitate to imitate

If you’re not sure how to get an interaction started with your child, imitate his actions and sounds. For example, if your child is pushing a car across the floor, get your own car and push your car across the floor too. If your child is making a sound (“vroom”), you can make that sound too. If your child notices you and repeats the action or sound, imitate him again. In this way, your interaction will take off!

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Make your best guess when you don’t understand your child

When you can’t understand what your child is saying, look at the context and at what she seems to be looking at. This might help you figure out her message. Then make your best guess, based on this information. If you can’t guess, try imitating what she has said. Sometimes, when they see you trying to understand what they are saying, children will attempt to send their message a second time with a little more clarity.

Ask choice questions to help your child use a word

Offer a choice between two items (e.g., “Do you want an **apple** or a **banana**?”), holding the items out when you say the words. In this way, your child hears the word modeled within the question which makes it easier for him to respond, **especially if the last word is the one you think he wants!** And if your child isn’t ready to use the word, he can always reach for or point to the items you are holding.

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7 Use familiar daily routines as opportunities for your child to communicate

Pause at a key moment or interrupt the routine to give your child a chance to communicate. For example, hold your child’s shoe in your hand before you put it on. Or playfully give her a fork for her yogurt. In this way, your child will be encouraged to communicate. If she uses a word, that’s wonderful. If she sends a nonverbal message, reward her communication by saying a word or short sentence which reflects her message (e.g., “You want daddy to put on your shoe”, or “Silly me! You need a **spoon** to eat your yoghurt!”). It’s best not to overuse this technique– it is designed to be fun, not to frustrate your child.

Expect your child to use a word at some times but not others

Don’t be frustrated if your child uses a word at some times but not others. When children first learn to talk, they need lots of practice using a word before it becomes part of their regular vocabulary. Continue to respond with enthusiasm to all of your child’s attempts to communicate (verbally or nonverbally) by responding with what you think he is trying to say. For example, if he sometimes says, “wawa” for water, but at other times (e.g., when you are getting his bath ready), he just makes sounds, don’t be tempted to insist he say “wawa”. Just say, “Mommy’s putting **water** in the tub. Oooh, the **water’s** nice and warm.” The more times he hears the word, the easier it will become for him to remember how it sounds and to say it himself.

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9 Use gestures when you speak to your child

Gestures are an important part of communication and will help your child understand what you are saying. For example, if you want your child to wash her face, pretend to wash your face as you say, “Okay, **wash** your face”. Or, if you are asking her to go and get her shoes, point to the shoes while you give the instruction. Gestures also provide your child with examples of nonverbal messages that she can use herself. In addition, they are thought to be a “bridge” to learning to say the words they represent.

When your child says a word, expand on his message

When your child says a word or two words, help him learn the next step by **expanding his message**. You do this by turning the one or two words he has said into a short, grammatical sentence. For example, if your child says “on” when you turn on the lights, you could say “The **lights** are on”. Or if your child says “car” wanting you to push the car, you could say “OK, Mommy’s gonna **push** the car.” By hearing you expand his message, your child is learning the next step in using language, which he will use when he is ready.

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