

7 Communication Skills Development Tips

Here are seven strategies for promoting language development in children with a variety of disabilities including those who are nonverbal:

1. Encourage play and social interaction.

Children learn through play and that includes learning language. Interactive play provides opportunities for you and your child to communicate. Try a variety of games to find those your child enjoys, including playful activities that promote social interaction such as singing or reciting nursery rhymes. During your interactions, position yourself in front of your child close to eye level so it's easier for your child to see and hear you.

2. Imitate your child.

Mimicking your child's sounds and play behaviors will encourage more vocalizing and interaction. It also encourages your child to copy you and take turns. Make sure you imitate how your child is playing – so long as it's a positive behavior. For example, when your child rolls a car, you roll a car. If he crashes the car, you crash your's too. But don't imitate throwing the car!

3. Focus on nonverbal communication.

Gestures and eye contact can build a foundation for language. Encourage your child by modeling and responding with these behaviors. Exaggerate your gestures. Use both your body and your voice when communicating. For example, extending your hand to point when you say "look" and nodding your head when you say "yes." Use gestures that are easy for your child to imitate such as clapping. Respond to your child's gestures: when she looks at or points to a toy, hand it to her or take the cue for you to play with it.

4. Leave "space" for your child to talk.

It's natural to feel the urge to fill in language when a child doesn't immediately respond, but it is important to give your child lots of opportunities to communicate, even if he isn't talking. When you ask a question or see that your child wants something, pause for several seconds while looking at him



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expectantly. Watch for any sound or body movement and respond promptly. The promptness of your response helps your child feel the power of communication.

5. Simplify your language.

Doing so helps your child follow what you're saying. It also makes it easier for her to imitate your speech. If your child is nonverbal, try speaking mostly in single words. (If she's playing with a ball, you say "ball" or "roll.") If your child is speaking single words, follow the "one-up" rule and use phrases with one more word than she is using. For example, "roll ball" or "throw ball."

6. Follow your child's interests.

Rather than interrupting your child's focus, follow along with words. Use the one-up rule to narrate what your child is doing. If he's playing with a shape sorter, you might say the word "in" when he puts a shape in its slot and "shape" when he holds up the shape. By talking about what engages your child, you'll help him learn the associated vocabulary.

7. Consider assistive devices and visual supports.

Assistive technologies and visual supports can do more than take the place of speech, they can foster its development. Examples include devices and apps with pictures that your child touches to produce words. Visual supports can include pictures that she can use to indicate requests and thoughts.

Final Thoughts

Even with tremendous effort, a strategy that works well with one child may not work with another. Every person can learn to communicate, though it's not always through spoken language. Nonverbal individuals have much to contribute to society and can live fulfilling lives with the help of visual supports and assistive technologies.

Your child's therapists are uniquely qualified to help you select and use these and other strategies for encouraging language development. Tell the therapist about your successes as well as any difficulties you're having. By working with your child's intervention team, you can help provide the support your child needs to find his or her unique "voice."



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