

10 Strategies to Help Toddlers Learn to Talk

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Some toddlers seem to talk without any help at all. For others, we need to help a bit more. Here are some of my favorite strategies for helping toddlers learn to talk (in no particular order):

SAY THEIR WORDS

Talking about your toddler's interests will make much more of an impact than talking about what we are thinking. Use short phrases, single words, and even just meaningful sounds to say HIS ideas and give verbal/vocal meaning to his thoughts. Just because he is playing with a shape sorter does not mean he wants to name shapes and colors. So if we are spending more time asking "what's that?" and "where's the circle?" then we are not giving voice to HIS ideas. He may be more interested in stacking the shapes, so say "up, up, up"; he may think it's fun to tap the shapes together, so try "bang, bang, bang"; he may just want to toss the shapes into a bucket, so then you could say "whee" or "uh-oh" or "ready, set, GO". Follow HIS ideas, give words to HIS play. Say HIS words.



MAKE THE MOMENTS COUNT

The moments that your toddler initiates communication (showing you something, reaching for something, pointing to something) happen throughout the day and should not be missed. When your toddler points, be sure to name the object before you ask a question. When your toddler is struggling to make a decision, offer two choices. When your toddler grabs your hand and wants you to follow, say the word they should use to ask you to stand "up" or "come" here or "help". Toddlers may not be interested in repeating the same task or playing with the same toy for too long so make sure you those "moments" count.

MAKE IT ACTIVE

Children learn to imitate and move before they learn to talk. If words are a challenge, use what they CAN do – imitate and move. Using gestures and motions with sounds allows a toddler to imitate the motion if the sound isn't ready yet. When we greet people we say "hi" and wave. Most of the time, toddlers will imitate the waving before they say the word "hi". That's perfect. Let's do more of that. Pair the sound with an action. When you say "dinosaur", try stomping your feet with the syllables "di-no-saur". Your toddler may stomp back. When you say "GO...", try patting your mouth as you hold that "oh" sound. Your toddler may vocalize "oh" when he imitates the motion of smacking his own mouth – ha!

BETTER TOGETHER – SING AND CHANT

Doing things with others is often less intimidating than being expected to put on a solo performance. When we sing and chant and complete familiar phrases at the SAME time as our toddlers, we give them opportunities to see our mouths move in the same way that their mouths should be moving. It's so powerful. It's also fun! Songs provide predictable and repetitive patterns to our words and pair those words with melody and intonation. Using familiar songs, making up your own with functional phrases, or just chanting and completing phrases together e.g. "turn the... (page)" allows the toddler to practice words in the same way over and over again in a FUN way because you say them together!

THIS OR THAT

When the activity options are endless or the snack pantry is a free-for-all then making a choice can be super challenging – for anyone. Offering your toddler a choice of ONLY TWO options can help to limit the words needed. When you know what your toddler wants, offer it as the 2nd option. For example, your toddler loves goldfish crackers and you're pretty sure that's what she wants. Offer an obvious non-preferred choice first then the most obvious preferred choice 2nd, as in "broccoli or goldfish". By offering the most preferred option 2nd, you've really just created an opportunity for your toddler to repeat the last word they heard rather than ALSO

having to make a definite choice AND come up with the right word. That's hard. We don't want to make it hard. We want success!

WATCH ME

Toddlers are busy. Super busy. They don't always want to interrupt their activities in order to look at us, so we have to make it interesting and purposeful to watch our mouths move. Drawing attention to our mouth when we say single words or sounds helps her watch the movement of speech. Can't find something? Call out to the missing object while cupping your hands around your mouth... "Daddy, where are you?" Can't find a ball? Search for it (with purpose) "Ball?" "Ba-aaall, where are you". Watching how the mouth moves can also help when your preschooler needs to learn how to say specific sounds correctly.

BREAK IT DOWN AND BUILD IT UP

When words aren't easy, try sounds. Sometimes you may need to simplify a word down to its smallest part in order for your toddler to attempt it. For example, he loves dinosaurs but he never says "dinosaur". Break it down. "Dinosaur. Dino. Di. Duh. Roar." Offer any or all of these simplified versions of the word to see when your toddler is willing and able to attempt an imitation of whatever you said. Sometimes we need to go all the way down to a meaningful sound "ROAR!" No matter what level we model, we then need to help build the word back up so that, over time, your toddler learns to say the whole word. How about "milk"? Try "milk, mi, mmmm" or the sign for milk. Playing with sounds will ultimately help encourage a vocal toddler.

FORGET EVERYTHING

Creating opportunities to talk is one of my favorite ways of talking with toddlers. These early "conversations" open the door for little ones to participate, but they don't have to. When we pretend that we don't know where things are, or can't remember something, then this gives toddlers their big chance to help US! For example, give a toddler his yogurt but forget to give the spoon. Give the toddler just ONE cracker but forget to give more. The idea is that we want to talk WITH our toddlers, not just AT them. Asking them about their ideas or where things are or how to solve a problem, gives them opportunities to communicate. Sometimes, the LESS you know, the more they can help!

TAKE THE PRESSURE OFF

Taking the pressure off may be one of the most effective strategies we can use to open the doors of communication. I've already mentioned the strategies of singing, offering choices, and being forgetful which are great pressure-reducers. However, one of my favorite pressure-reducing strategies is to start with two little words: "I wonder". Rather than ask your toddler "what's this", try wondering aloud while YOU look at the picture of the ball: "I wonder what this is." Sounds simple and maybe you're thinking that won't work. Try it. Just "wonder and wait".

LEAVE THEM WANTING MORE

Your toddler thinks it's HILARIOUS to pop bubbles or play "peek-a-boo" or "tickle me" or "throw me in the air". Whatever gets his interest, give that game a name! Then wait. Wait until HE gives you some indication that he wants it to continue. He may smile, he may search, he may reach, he may look at you... whatever it is – WAIT for it. When he indicates the game needs to go on – NAME it or say "more" or "again"! The more we continuously entertain our children without waiting for their requests, the more we have missed opportunities to help them communicate!

Be sure to check out the FULL article on my website with additional strategies, suggestions, and links to other helpful tips!

*For the FULL article, go to www.letsplaythespeechandlanguage.com.

