

# Where's the speech in speech therapy?

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"It looks like they are just playing. Is that all they do?"  
If you've ever watched a speech therapy session with a one- or two- year old, you may have asked yourself this question. What looks like "just play" actually has a whole bunch of strategy and purpose that goes with it.

How do little ones typically learn to walk?

*They explore. They play.*

How do little ones typically learn to talk?

*They listen. They watch. They play.*

Just as we don't usually pick up a child's foot and move it into position to teach walking, we also don't take a child's mouth and move it into position while simultaneously vibrating her vocal cords to create sound. That just isn't possible.

Children learn best through PLAY. They are interested in play. Play is motivating. Play is fun. They want to play... again and again and again. Sometimes speech therapy starts with play and sometimes speech therapy starts *before* play.

I often wish that it was called "communication therapy" and that I was considered a "communication coach" but *speech (and language) therapy* is the name. So, we have to explain.

In order to really play with others, the child first must be interested in others. They have to learn the skills of making eye contact, imitating movements and sounds, taking turns, anticipating actions, smiling when things are funny, checking in with caregivers when things are scary, using gestures like pointing, and understanding that words and sounds have meaning. When I say "uh-oh", a child needs to know that something bad or messy just happened. When I say "get your shoes on", a child needs to anticipate that we may be leaving the house. All of these things need to happen BEFORE speech and, sometimes, that's where speech therapy has to start. To figure out why a child isn't yet using words we sometimes need to explore their PLAY skills.

"But my child plays just fine. When do you teach him to talk?"

Great question! If all of your child's "pre-verbal"/play skills are developing on track then a speech therapist uses play to continue to engage your child on *their* level with a whole bunch of strategies to try and help little ones learn to use their voice. Strategies might include offering choices, simplifying words, increasing meaningful sounds, reducing commands and questions, increasing visual attention to the speaker's mouth, playing forgetful games, placing items just slightly out of reach, etc. The point is, yes, we play. **However, we aren't there to provide entertainment. We expect play to be a two-way street with communication as the ultimate goal.**

So, the next time you watch a speech therapy session, look for the strategy behind the fun. That's the magic.

\*For the FULL article and more strategies for early talking, go to [www.letsplaythespeechandlanguage.com](http://www.letsplaythespeechandlanguage.com).

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