

# It Takes Two to Talk® Helps More Than Communication, New Studies Show

By Lauren Lowry

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The It Takes Two to Talk® program has been [studied several times](#), and we know that it has many benefits for both children and their parents. Recently, two new studies showed that *It Takes Two to Talk* can have an impact on more than children’s communication skills.

## Study #1: It Takes Two to Talk® helps children’s behaviour and social-emotional skills

Children with early language delay sometimes also have difficulties with:

- **behaviour** – They may have tantrums, hit others, or cry easily [1]. These behaviours are often thought to be related to their difficulty with expressing themselves and making themselves understood.
- **social-emotional skills** – These are skills that help us understand and manage our emotions and have effective relationships.

Since children’s language development is often connected to their behaviour and social-emotional skills, researchers in Australia wanted to see if helping parents promote their child’s language development would have the added benefit of improving their child’s behaviour and social-emotional skills [1].

The researchers studied 121 children with delayed language, who were enrolled in 20 different *It Takes Two to Talk* programs across Queensland, Australia. The children were between ages 18 months – 4 years. The researchers looked at how the parents interacted with their child after taking the *It Takes Two to Talk* program, as well as how the children’s behaviour and social-emotional skills changed.

The researchers noticed the following changes after parents attended *It Takes Two to Talk*:

- **Parent-child interaction improved** – Parents used the *It Takes Two to Talk* strategies more frequently by the end of the program.
- **Children’s behaviour improved** – Even though most of the children didn’t have frequent behavioural difficulties at the beginning of the program, they still made improvements, according to their parents. Parents reported that their children didn’t whine as often and were able to concentrate better on activities. They also said that their children didn’t constantly seek out attention as they did before, and didn’t get angry as often when they didn’t get their own way.
- **Fewer children were considered at-risk for social-emotional difficulties** – Before the *It Takes Two to Talk* program, more than half of the children were identified as being at-risk for social-emotional difficulties. By the end of the program, however, only one third of the children met the criteria for being at-risk for these difficulties.

The researchers concluded that programs like *It Takes Two to Talk* that help parents learn how to promote their child’s communication development may have benefits that go beyond improved interaction and communication.

## Study #2: *It Takes Two to Talk*® supports children’s social communication development

Learning to communicate involves more than learning to say words and sentences; it involves knowing how to use language to interact with others. To be effective communicators, children must learn the rules of back-and-forth conversation, as well as learn to adjust their language to a variety of social situations, and to understand and use nonverbal communication (such as eye contact and body language). These skills that help us interact with others are known as social communication skills.

Because the *It Takes Two to Talk* program is based on the idea that children learn to communicate during everyday social interactions, a group of researchers in Spain wanted to know if the program would improve not only children’s language (their vocabulary and grammar), but also their social communication skills [2].

The researchers also wanted to look at whether the *It Takes Two to Talk* program had an impact on parents’ wellbeing, such as their stress level and how they perceived their child’s communication difficulties. Since parents play a central role in the *It Takes Two to Talk* program, their wellbeing could affect how effectively they would learn and use the program strategies.

The study compared two groups of families:

1. **ITTT group** – In *It Takes Two to Talk*, the parent is the main person delivering the intervention, as they learn strategies to use as they play and interact with their child. In this study, 10 families participated in an *It Takes Two to Talk* program, which involves 8 parent-only group sessions to learn the program strategies, and three individual sessions with their child to practice the program strategies, which are recorded by the speech-language pathologist. Parents receive coaching during the interaction and then review the recording with the speech-language pathologist during these sessions.

2. **traditional one-to-one speech therapy group** – in this group, the speech-language pathologist interacted directly with the child and was the main person delivering the intervention. For four months, the 7 children in this group received one or two weekly sessions with a speech-language pathologist who had not been trained in *It Takes Two to Talk*.

The children in the study were all considered “late talkers,” meaning they had a language delay but no delays in other areas (such as physical or cognitive delays).

**The researchers noticed the following changes in the children and their parents after the interventions:**

- **Children’s language skills (vocabulary and grammar) improved in both groups**
- **Children’s social communication skills improved more in the *It Takes Two to Talk* group**
- **Differences in parents’ stress weren’t noticed between the two groups** – however, parents in both groups started off with low levels of stress, so this wasn’t surprising
- **Parents’ perceptions of their child’s communication development were better in the *It Takes Two to Talk* group**

Besides the positive changes in children’s social communication skills and parents’ perceptions, the researchers pointed out an additional benefit of *It Takes Two to Talk*: the program provided intervention in a more efficient and cost-effective way than the traditional speech therapy group, which involved more than twice as many sessions as *It Takes Two to Talk*.

## Putting this all together

These studies provide us with more evidence that *It Takes Two to Talk* has benefits for children and their families beyond improved interaction and language skills.

In summary, *It Takes Two to Talk*:

- can impact children’s behaviour, social-emotional development, and social communication skills
- improves parents’ perception of their child’s communication development
- delivers the same – or better – results than traditional speech therapy for children who are “late talkers,” and takes much less time

Taken together with [past research on the program](#), we now have several studies which show the far-reaching influence of the *It Takes Two to Talk*<sup>®</sup> program.

[Read more about \*It Takes Two to Talk\*](#)

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## Activities to Encourage Speech and Language Development

There are many ways you can help your child learn to understand and use words. See a speech-language pathologist if you have concerns.

### Birth to 2 Years

- Say sound like "ma," "da," and "ba." Try to get your baby to say them back to you.
- Look at your baby when he makes sounds. Talk back to him, and say what he says. Pretend to have a conversation.
- Respond when your baby laughs or makes faces. Make the same faces back to her.
- Teach your baby to do what you do, like clapping your hands and playing peek-a-boo.
- Talk to your baby as you give him a bath, feed him, and get him dressed. Talk about what you are doing and where you are going. Tell him who or what you will see.
- Point out colors and shapes.
- Count what you see.
- Use gestures, like waving and pointing.
- Talk about animal sounds. This helps your baby connect the sound and the animal. Use words like "The dog says woof-woof."
- Add on to what your baby says. When your baby says, "Mama," say, "Here is Mama. Mama loves you. Where is baby? Here is baby."
- Read to your child. You don't have to read every word, but talk about the pictures. Choose books that are sturdy and have large colorful pictures. Ask your child, "What's this?" and try to get him to point to or name objects.

### 2 to 4 Years

- Speak clearly to your child. Model good speech.
- Repeat what your child says to show that you understand. Add on to what she says. Use words like, "Want juice? I have juice. I have apple juice. Do you want apple juice?"
- It's okay to use baby talk sometimes. Be sure to use the adult word too. For example, "It is time for din-din. We will have dinner now."
- Cut out pictures of favorite or familiar things. Put them into categories, like things to ride on, things to eat, and things to play with. Make silly pictures by mixing and matching pictures. Glue a picture of a dog behind the wheel of a car. Talk about what is wrong with the picture and ways to "fix" it.

- Help your child understand and ask questions. Play the yes–no game. Ask questions such as, "Are you Marty?" and "Can a pig fly?" Have your child make up questions and try to fool you.
- Ask questions that include a choice. "Do you want an apple or an orange?" "Do you want to wear your red shirt or your blue shirt?"
- Help your child learn new words. Name body parts, and talk about what you do with them. "This is my nose. I can smell flowers, brownies, and soap."
- Sing simple songs, and say nursery rhymes. This helps your child learn the rhythm of speech.
- Place familiar objects in a box. Have your child take one out and tell you its name and how to use it. "This is my ball. I bounce it. I play with it."
- Show pictures of familiar people and places. Talk about who they are and what happened. Try making up new stories.

## 4 to 6 Years

- Pay attention when your child talks to you.
- Get your child's attention before you talk.
- Praise your child when she tells you something. Show that you understand her words.
- Pause after speaking. This gives your child a chance to respond.
- Keep helping your child learn new words. Say a new word, and tell him what it means, or use it in a way that helps him understand. For example, you can use the word "vehicle" instead of "car." You can say, "I think I will drive the vehicle to the store. I am too tired to walk."
- Talk about where things are, using words like "first," "middle," and "last" or "right" and "left." Talk about opposites like "up" and "down" or "on" and "off."
- Have your child guess what you describe. Say, "We use it to sweep the floor," and have her find the broom. Say, "It is cold, sweet, and good for dessert. I like strawberry" so she can guess "ice cream."
- Work on groups of items, or categories. Find the thing that does not belong in a group. For example, "A shoe does not go with an apple and an orange because you can't eat it. It is not round. It is not a fruit."
- Help your child follow two- and three-step directions. Use words like, "Go to your room, and bring me your book."
- Ask your child to give directions. Follow his directions as he tells you how to build a tower of blocks.
- Play games with your child such as "house." Let her be the parent, and you pretend to be the child. Talk about the different rooms and furniture in the house.
- Watch movies together on TV or a tablet. Talk about what your child is watching. Have her guess what might happen next. Talk about the characters. Are they happy or sad? Ask her to tell you what happened in the story. Act out a scene together, or make up a different ending.

- Use everyday tasks to learn language. For example, talk about the foods on the menu and their color, texture, and taste when in the kitchen. Talk about where to put things. Ask her to put the napkin on the table, in your lap, or under the spoon. Talk about who the napkin belongs to. Say, "It is my napkin." "It is Daddy's." "It is Tamara's."
- Go grocery shopping together. Talk about what you will buy, how many things you need, and what you will make. Talk about sizes, shapes, and weight.



## When a Child Has a Language Delay, Research Shows That Parents Can Make a Big Difference!

By Lauren Lowry  
Hanen SLP & Clinical Writer

Many years ago, when a child had a language delay, parents took them to a speech language pathologist (SLP) who worked with him or her directly, while the parent observed. Parents were given some ideas for practice at home with their child, but the SLP was the main person providing the therapy.

Nowadays, we know there's a better way to help children. Parents know their child best and spend much more time with their child than an SLP can. So now, the main focus of language intervention with young children is to help parents learn to provide intervention in natural and enjoyable ways at home. In this kind of therapy, the SLP is more of a coach, helping parents learn strategies that build children's language skills, working with the parent to find activities that the child enjoys and brainstorming solutions to problems. We call this "parent-implemented intervention".

The main focus of language intervention with young children is to help parents learn to provide intervention in natural and enjoyable ways at home.

Researchers have studied whether parents can be as effective as SLPs in improving a child's language skills and have shown that indeed they can. In fact, in some cases, children improve more when their parent is the main person providing the intervention! In the past decade, a few researchers have looked at a large number of studies to see if there were any patterns and trends with this type of intervention. Many of these studies have included research on Hanen Parent Programs, including the [It Takes Two to Talk® Program](#) and the [More Than Words® Program](#).



Here are some of the trends the researchers found:

- **Parents are either as effective or more effective than an SLP at helping their child**

In 2011, two researchers looked at the results from 18 different studies of young children with a variety of reasons for their language delay (different diagnoses) [1]. They found that, when parents learned to use strategies to help their child, the children's language skills improved, and they learned to communicate more often. In fact, children improved just as much when their parents provided the therapy as they did when it was provided by an SLP. Parent-implemented intervention resulted in even better comprehension and grammar than therapy from a professional.

- **When parents use naturalistic strategies with their child, their child's language skills improve.** Naturalistic strategies make use of everyday activities and routines in a child's life and involve the parent following the child's lead by responding to all of the child's attempts to communicate during these routines. These are the types of strategies used in the Hanen approach. A 2014 study looked at naturalistic language approaches and found that children's language skills improved when parents used these types of strategies [2].

- **Toddlers who are late to talk benefit when parents provide the therapy, and parents report a reduction in their stress.**

A 2017 study compared the effects of therapy given by SLPs versus parents [3]. Researchers looked at studies of children under the age of 3 who were late to start talking but didn't have any underlying reason for their language delay (they didn't have a diagnosis or other explanation for the delay). They found that children improved both when therapy was provided by a professional and by their own parent. However, in two studies, children's understanding of language seemed to benefit more from parent-implemented intervention! The other important finding from this study was that parents reported feeling less stressed after learning how to help their child.

- **A variety of children can benefit from this approach.**

A large review of 76 studies in 2019 included research on children with a variety of reasons for their language delay [4]. For some children, the cause was unknown (this is often referred to as "[Developmental Language Disorder](#)"); other children had diagnoses such as autism spectrum disorder, hearing loss, or developmental disability. Researchers found that children, regardless of their diagnosis, improved in their ability to communicate and interact when their parents provided the intervention. While all children benefitted, children with Developmental Language Disorder showed the biggest improvements.

- **Parents can use different activities to encourage their child's language skills.**

A recent review of 25 studies looked at several ways this approach affects children, including the type of activity parents use to build their child's language skills [5]. They compared whether sharing books with their child resulted in better language skills as compared to using strategies during play and everyday routines. They found that both types of activities were great ways to help children develop their language skills. This study also showed that, when parents use strategies that encourage language development, their children's expressive vocabulary and language skills improve.

As you can see, research shows that parents can be as effective (if not more effective) as SLPs when it comes to providing intervention for young children with language delay. If you are concerned about your child's language development and find an SLP who will help you learn to provide intervention to your child at home, what you learn will be really interesting and powerful! Hanen certified speech-language pathologists help you learn Hanen strategies that may seem simple (such as Observe, Wait and Listen; Follow your Child's Lead; Ask questions that continue the conversation; Highlight your language), but they are very effective. These strategies encourage your child to interact with you for longer periods of time, which is the foundation for language learning. They also help you talk to your child so that your language is at just the right level. The everyday interactions you have with your child provide countless opportunities for language learning. And you won't be alone in the process – your SLP will help and support you as you learn how to help your child reach his or her potential.

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*Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.*

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## Es and Ps with Falling Leaves: Tips to Strengthen Your Child’s Language and Thinking

Every conversation you have with your child gives her opportunities to build her language skills. If your child is preschool aged (3—5 years old), you can give her language learning an extra boost by adding the “E’s and Ps” to your everyday conversations.

### What are the E’s and P’s?

The E’s and P’s are seven ways to expand your child’s thinking and use of language. They are: **Explaining**, **Experiences**, **Emotions**, **Evaluating**, **Predicting**, **Pretending/Imagining** and **Problem-solving**.

When you use the E’s and P’s, you encourage your child to use her knowledge and experience, as well as her problem-solving skills, to do things like:

- compare and contrast
- explain why things happen
- evaluate ideas and form opinions
- understand the perspectives of others
- predict what will happen in the future
- think of creative solutions

When you have conversations that support your child to think this way, you encourage her to use her language skills to talk about topics beyond what is happening in the moment. Conversations like this encourage your child to use more complex language with words like “because”, phrases with “if” and “then”, and different verb tenses. This is also the kind of language your child will be expected to use in school, so building this language now sets her on the path to academic success.

## Using falling leaves to build the E's and P's

Whether your child likes jumping in giant piles of leaves, kicking through them with her boots, or collecting them in different colours, one thing is for sure – the fall season provides lots of opportunities for interesting and enjoyable conversations.

Here are some tips for how you can build the E's and P's while out on a walk among the autumn leaves:

### Explain

It's important for your child to understand not only what is happening, but why something is happening. This builds her understanding of cause-and-effect and encourages her to come up with her own explanations for things.

*What you could say:*

“The reason the leaves are falling is because the trees go to sleep for the winter. They'll grow new leaves when it's warm and sunny again in the spring.”

### Experiences

Relating what you see to something your child knows or has experienced helps her make connections between old and new learning.

*What you could say:*

“Wow, look at that big pile of leaves! It's just like the big pile we had in our backyard when we raked up all the leaves. Do you remember how you and your brother took turns jumping in it?”

### Emotions

Talking about emotions helps your child understand their own as well as others' feelings, which is an important part of learning to take the perspective of others.

*What you could say:*

“I feel excited when the leaves first start to change in the fall since it reminds me that it's time to go apple picking! How do you feel when the leaves start to fall?”

## Predict

When you encourage your child to think about what will happen next, you help her think and talk about events beyond the present moment and also use what she already knows to talk about the future.

*What you could say:*

“What do you think will happen to all these leaves on the ground?”

## Pretend/Imagine

Encouraging your child to imagine themselves in a new or unfamiliar situation builds empathy and helps them understand others' perspectives.

*What you could say:*

“What do you think it would be like to be a leaf falling from the tree?”

## Problem-solve

Creating opportunities for your child to solve problems encourages her to draw upon her background knowledge and reasoning skills and promotes the use of more complex language.

*What you could say:*

“Uh-oh, it looks like your pants got all wet from playing in the leaf pile. What should we do?”

## More E's and P's

Can you think of any other ways you could use the E's and P's during fall-related events and activities? Remember, you can use the E's and P's in many different activities throughout the day to inspire enjoyable, language-building conversations.

For tips on how you can use the E's and P's to build your child's early literacy skills, take a look at the links below:

- [More Than ABCs: Building the Critical Thinking Skills Your Child Needs for Literacy Success](#)
- [How to Build Literacy at Home](#)



# Four Things You Might Not Know About Language Learning Difficulties in Childhood

*By Lauren Lowry  
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Some young children are late to start talking but seem to catch up to other children their age. Other children, however, continue to struggle with language learning, and this difficulty can continue beyond early childhood and affect their reading, writing, and math skills later on [1].

When a child's difficulties with language cannot be explained by something else (such as a syndrome or physical difficulty) and continue into the school-aged years, this is known as **Developmental Language Disorder (DLD)**.

Here are some things you may not know about Developmental Language Disorder:

## 1. There have been many names used to describe Developmental Language Disorder

Over the years, researchers and professionals have used many terms to describe childhood language difficulties, including:

- Specific language impairment
- Language disorder
- Language delay
- Language impairment
- Language learning impairment

It was confusing to have so many names to describe the same thing, as it suggested that these were different types of difficulties. A few years ago, experts agreed to use one term to describe language learning difficulties that continued beyond early childhood, and since then the term Developmental Language Disorder has been used [2].

## 2. Children with DLD may or may not have difficulties with pronunciation

Developmental Language Disorder involves problems with language, such as using a wide variety of words, using correct grammar, understanding instructions, or telling stories. This is not the same as a delay in speech skills, which involves difficulties with pronouncing words. Some children with Developmental Language Disorder have difficulties with both speech and language, but problems with speech are not a necessary part of Developmental Language Disorder.

## 3. Problems with language development are more common than you might think

It is estimated that roughly 7% of children have Developmental Language Disorder. This means that in a classroom of 30 children, it's possible that two children will have DLD [3]. Developmental Language Disorder is almost 7 times more common than autism spectrum disorder and 46 times more common than childhood hearing impairment [1].

Even though Developmental Language Disorder is not uncommon, many children's difficulties are not identified, and they do not receive the help they need. One study looked at 245 children and found that 85 of them had Developmental Language Disorder. Of these 85 children, only half of them had ever been referred for help with their language skills [4].

## 4. The earlier children get the help they need, the better their outcomes

There are many things we can do to help children with Developmental Language Disorder. It's important for parents to get help for their child as early as possible. Speech-language pathologists work with the child's parents and teachers to develop a plan for how to help the child develop improved language skills. Parents' involvement in the intervention is key to helping their child and the earlier children receive help, the better chance they have to learn the skills they need to be successful at school [5].

If you are concerned about a child's language development, the best thing to do is contact a doctor who can refer you to a speech-language pathologist or contact a speech-language pathologist directly.

For more information about Developmental Language Disorder, please see the following two websites, which have been created by experts in the field to raise public awareness about DLD:

- [dldandme.org](http://dldandme.org)
- [radld.org](http://radld.org)

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### About The Hanen Centre

*Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.*

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## Making New Words “Stick”

*By Lauren Lowry  
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Parents of young children who are just starting to talk sometimes ask these types of questions:

- *My child said “cookie” last week, but he hasn’t said it since then. Why?*
- *My child calls her teddy bear “teddy”, but why does she also call all of her stuffed animals “teddy”?*
- *My child can copy me when I say “open”. So why can’t he say it on his own?*

As young children learn about words and build their early vocabulary, it isn’t always a smooth road. This is especially true for children with language delays who have difficulty making new words “stick”. This has to do with how children learn words.

The main way children learn words is by hearing them used in their everyday life. But it is not a straightforward process. Think about this common situation:

While out for a walk, mom points to a four-legged animal and says, “Look at that little dog!” The fact that there is a dog across the street and mom pointed to it gives her child clues about what she’s talking about. But the child also has to learn:

- which one of mom’s words refers to the animal (Is the animal called “little”?).
- that the word “dog” refers to this particular type of four-legged animal (and not other small four-legged animals like cats or racoons).
- that there are many types of animals that are called “dog” (think about the many different breeds of dogs – and they all look very different!).
- that the word “dog” has a slightly different meaning depending on the other words in the sentence (e.g. a “guard dog” brings to mind a different image than a “service dog”).

That's a lot of information to understand, just to learn about a single word! Children develop this understanding gradually over time during the variety of everyday interactions they have with their caregivers. As they hear language used to talk about their daily activities and routines, they gain an increased understanding of what words mean and how to use them. They usually understand a word before they will say it, and they tend to start learning nouns first (names for people, places, and things). Then they add some simple verbs (action words) and adjectives (words that describe) to their vocabulary [1].

As children hear language used to talk about their daily activities and routines, they gain an increased understanding of what words mean and how to use them.

As they are learning about words, children use what information they have gathered so far to express themselves. This means that, early on, they use one word to refer to all things that have similar features (like saying “dog” for all animals with four legs). And even if they hear a word often, they may not yet understand its meaning or be able to recall how the word is said to use it regularly [1].

Children with language delays show the same patterns of word learning as typically developing children. However, it takes them longer to develop an understanding of the word and they need to hear words repeated more often and in more situations before they can use it when communicating with others [2].

There are some things parents and caregivers of young children can do to make word learning a bit easier.

## Tips for making words “stick”

All children, whether they have a language delay or not, learn best during enjoyable interactions with their caregivers. You don't need special toys or flashcards – the routines and activities that your child experiences every day are what he needs in order to learn new words. The best way to make words “stick” is to give your child lots of opportunities to hear new words during enjoyable activities that you do together. During these activities, you can:

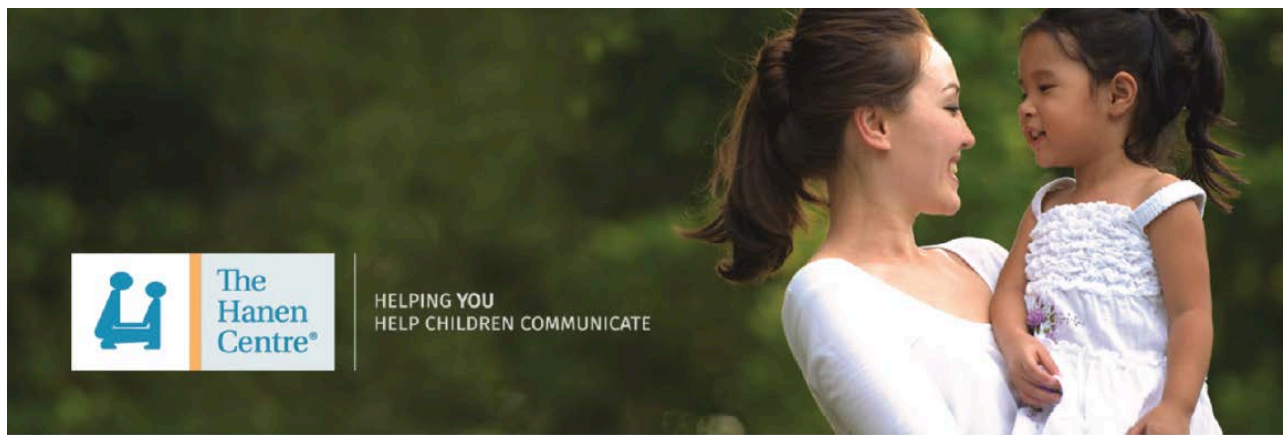
- **talk about things that interest your child** – when you talk about whatever has caught your child's attention in the moment, he will be more motivated to pay attention to what you are saying. To build his understanding, you both need to be looking at and paying attention to the same thing while you are talking about it.

- **repeat, repeat, and repeat** – children with language delays need to hear words repeated often in a variety of situations to build their understanding. Repeating doesn't mean saying the word a few times in a row. For example, if you want your child to learn about the word "water", it's not helpful to bombard your child by saying, "This is water. Water. Say water." Instead, try to use the word naturally as it comes up in conversation. Also, talk about water during different activities – while washing the dishes, during meals and bath time, and pretending to give a drink to a stuffed animal. Each of these different situations gives your child more information about the word and what it means.
- **make new words stand out with actions and gestures** – if you hold up an object or use a gesture that matches the meaning of a word, your child can match what he sees with the word he hears. This also helps him remember the word [3].
- **avoid pressuring your child to say words or to copy you** – when you pressure your child to repeat your words, it doesn't help him learn what the word means and how to use it. All it really shows us is that he can repeat the word, which is a different skill from knowing how to use a word to express what he wants to say.
- **expand on what your child says** – if your child says a word, turn it into a short, grammatical sentence. This gives your child more information about what the word means and its connection to other words. For example, if your child says "fish" while looking at a fish tank, you could expand by saying "Yes, the fish is swimming". By hearing "fish" used in the same sentence as "swimming", your child will start to learn that there is some connection between these two words. Also, by acknowledging what your child said, it lets him know that he used the word correctly [1].

Children with language delays need to hear a word repeated many times in a variety of situations to learn its meaning and how to use it. You can't assume a child knows a word if he says it once; if he uses a new word a few times in different situations, it shows you that the word is becoming part of his vocabulary. By talking to your child throughout the day and making new words stand out using these tips, you will help those new words "stick" as your child continues to develop his vocabulary.

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## Three Keys to Helping Your Child Learn Language

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As a parent, there are many things you can do to help your child learn to talk. If you search the internet, you'll find suggestions about reading to your child, teaching him songs and nursery rhymes, and playing imaginatively together. These are wonderful activities, but when it comes to learning language, it's not just about the games or books you share together. It has more to do with how you interact and talk to your child during these activities that makes all the difference.

There are three key things you can do during any activity that will help your child learn language:

### 1. Allow your child to lead the interaction

All of us tend to talk when we have something to say, and that usually happens when we are interested in the topic or something captures our attention in the moment. It's the same for children – they are most likely to try to communicate about their interests.

When you watch your child closely to see what he does, you will see what he's interested in. If you wait quietly for a moment, he might take the lead by showing you something, using a gesture or action, or even a word. Then, you can respond by talking about whatever it is that's caught his attention. If you continue to let your child lead and respond to him in this way, it encourages him to keep sending you more messages about his interests.

Allowing your child to lead the interaction ensures he is motivated to communicate with you, making it more likely that he will stay in the interaction. The longer he stays with you in an interaction, the more opportunities he'll have to hear language as you interact together. These back-and-forth interactions are actually

**Allowing your child to lead the interaction ensures he is motivated to communicate with you.**

[early conversations](#), and young children who have more of these little conversations tend to have better language skills later on [1].

## 2. Use words and sentences just slightly above your child's level

The next key to helping your child is to use language that is one step ahead of your child's level. If you are one small step ahead, you will give your child an example of how to move to the next level of language development.

To do this, you need to be aware of the ways your child is communicating right now. For example, he might send messages by:

- Looking at you
- Making sounds
- Using [gestures](#) (reaching for or giving you things, pointing, waving, etc.)
- Using single words (one at a time)
- [Combining two or three words together](#)
- Using sentences

If your child is communicating without words (by looking, making sounds, or gestures), use language that is slightly ahead by speaking in short, simple sentences with correct grammar. Avoid leaving out words or simplifying grammar because it makes it harder for children to learn the meaning of words and how to use them in a sentence (e.g. avoid saying "Daddy go" and instead say "Daddy's going") [2]. You can also use single words sometimes, but make sure to balance these with short sentences.

If your child is using words or combining words into short sentences, you can up the ante by speaking in sentences that are slightly longer than your child's sentences. By always staying one little step ahead of your child, you will give him many examples of how to combine more words and use longer sentences himself. A helpful way to stay one step ahead is to expand what your child says by using his word(s) in a slightly longer sentence. For example, if your child holds up a big ball and says "ball", you can keep the conversation going by saying "Ooh that's a big ball!". If your child says "want cookie", you can respond by saying "You want a cookie. You love cookies."

**By staying one little step ahead of your child, you will give him many examples of how to combine more words and use longer sentences.**

### 3. Talk about things that build your child's understanding

The final key to helping your child is to talk about things that get him thinking and build his understanding. The things you talk about will depend on your child's interests as well as on his stage of language development:

- Children who haven't started talking yet or are using a few words need to hear you talk about the things they see and experience during their daily activities. This type of language is very concrete and describes [what is happening in the moment](#). For example, if your toddler is trying to build a tower with blocks and he says "down!" as they fall down, you can describe what's happening in the moment by saying "Oh no! Your blocks fell down".
- As children start to use more words and short phrases, they begin to understand simple comments and questions about things that happened in the recent past or will happen in the near future ("We're going to Grandma's house today"), or descriptions or explanations about things that happen in the moment (e.g. "We can't use the wagon because the wheel is broken").
- When children start to use sentences, you can keep building their understanding by talking about more abstract topics (things they can't see or touch or aren't experiencing at that moment). These types of topics extend your child's thinking and help connect his experiences with abstract language and ideas. Some examples include:
  - longer descriptions and explanations ("The muffins still look kind of gooey. I think we should put them back in the oven to cook a bit longer")
  - language that describes things in the past or future ("Remember when we went tobogganing and Daddy fell off and was covered in snow?!");
  - language used to predict or solve problems ("The fairy used up all of her fairy dust so she can't rescue the prince. What do you think she'll do now?")
  - language to describe peoples' thoughts and feelings ("I think he's sad because he lost his new toy").

The three tips above are the keys to helping you interact and talk to your child in a way that helps him learn about language. You can use these principles during any activity with your child – whether it's eating breakfast, reading a book, or playing with a toy. By letting your child take

the lead during interactions, using language that is one step ahead, and talking about topics that build his thinking and understanding, you will provide your child with exactly what he needs to reach his communication potential.

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