

Question: My child is two years old, and she is not talking nearly as much as some of the other two year olds in her class. She understands almost everything she hears, but she doesn't use a lot of words. Should I be worried? How can I help her express herself?

Young children understand language long before they are able to use words to express themselves. It can be tempting to compare your child to other children her age, but it is important to remember that children develop language at different paces and in different ways. You can't speed up your child's development, but there are many things you can do to support her by promoting the life skill of Communicating.

Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University talks about the most effective approach for promoting children's language development:

There are so many ways that parents and caregivers can encourage language in young children, and it's not through flash cards—it's through conversations, it's through questioning, it's [through] being responsive to what a child is interested in.

Communicating is much more than understanding language, speaking, reading and writing—it is the skill of determining what one wants to communicate and realizing how our communications will be understood by others. It is the skill that teachers and employers feel is most lacking today.

1

Notice how your child communicates.

Although your child might not be using a lot of words, she is still communicating with you. What does she do to tell you what she wants or needs? Does she use her hands to point or make other gestures? Can you tell what she's feeling by looking at her face? Respond to your child's efforts at communication, whether she uses sounds, a point or words.

- The research of Susan Goldin-Meadow of the University of Chicago shows that gestures are the first steps that all children take into language. If your child points to a cup of water, recognize what she is saying and put it into words: "You want water."
- Encourage your child to keep talking by praising her efforts: "Thank you for telling me what you want!"

The American Academy of Pediatrics gives the following guidelines for your two year old's language development:

- Listen for your child's use of two-word sentences or phrases, like "want milk" and "go home."
- Give your child simple one- or two-step commands like: "Pick up the sweater and bring it to me."

- Hearing and vision problems can impact developing communication skills, so talk to your pediatrician if you have any concerns about your child's hearing or vision or concerns about her language development.

2

Make sure your child has space and time to express herself.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, it can be hard for children to respond quickly at this age. Try to talk and ask questions slowly so that your child has the chance to respond to you without feeling pressured to answer.

- After asking your child a question, try counting to ten in your head before asking again. Sometimes all your child may need are a few extra moments to figure out what she wants to say and what words to use.
- Encourage your child to express herself through art experiences like drawing, painting, music and dance. These are great ways to communicate thoughts and feelings without using words.

Engaging in communication that promotes "Take-Turns Talk" helps children learn language. "Take-Turns Talk" means a back and forth conversation between you and your child where you listen, and then keep building on what your child says and does. Megan Gunnar of the University of Minnesota explains:

"Take-Turns Talk" form the platform for early learning. Children learn by reaching out, babbling and then having someone respond. Like a game of ball, the baby serves and a responsive adult returns the serve.

Megan Gunnar explains that by these back and forth, back and forth conversations with and without words, the connections in the brain for communicating are strengthened.

3

Have all kinds of conversations with your child.

Use many different kinds of communication with your child that encourage "serve and return," like back and forth talking, singing and gesturing. Remember, conversations with your child don't only use words.

- Try making a silly face at your child and see what she does. Does she laugh? Does she smile? Ask her to make a silly face next and take turns going back and forth.
- Have conversations with movements, like claps or waves. See if your child can copy what you do. Then add another gesture and see if she can do both of them. These kinds of activities also help your child strengthen her memory.

- Jack P. Shonkoff of Harvard University encourages parents: “Look for opportunities to serve and return. Look for serves—opportunities to interact—and return them with age-appropriate responses like smiles, words, pointing, play, cuddles or conversation.”

Janellen Huttenlocher of the University of Chicago says:

It's very important that language be embedded in a positive environment where everybody is thrilled—not about learning language per se, but learning something [they care about].

4

Surround your child with words.

The research of Patricia Kuhl of the University of Washington shows that children are learning language long before they can speak. Create an environment where language, sounds and communication are important in everyday life.

- Narrate your child's experiences. Act like a sports announcer and describe what your child is doing: “You drank all of your juice. You must have been thirsty!” But think of yourself as a two-way sports announcer. Give your child a chance to respond and respond back.
- Name and describe what you and your child are looking at: “Do you see the blue bird? It's flying in the sky. It makes a sound—tweet tweet.” Catherine Snow of Harvard University points out that the best talk with toddlers is “simple, concrete, repetitive and responsive.”
- Ask open-ended questions that use “who,” “what,” “where,” “when” and “why,” like: “Where do you think that car is going? Oh, look! The car stopped, and the people are going to the market.”
- Label your child's emotions. Help her make connections between her thoughts, feelings and actions: “It looks like you are angry that we have to leave the playground.”

5

Make it fun.

According to Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University and Roberta Golinkoff of the University of Delaware: “Learning takes place best when young children are engaged and enjoying themselves.” When you make language and communication fun for your child, you motivate her to keep going.

- Play games that require back and forth interactions like “I Spy,” where you describe something you see and your child has to guess what it is. When you and your child play games where you take turns acting and responding, you encourage “serve and return.”
- Pretend play is a great way for your child to practice using her communication skills in a fun and supportive environment. Play with your child to give her new words for her experiences and to add on to her ideas.

Study after study finds that reading with children is a powerful force in their lives and a way to better communication skills. Catherine Snow of Harvard University says:

[R]esearch shows that families in which children are read to regularly are families whose children are more likely to arrive at school with bigger vocabularies and a greater capacity to participate effectively in classroom. [It's] because they've had this kind of focused conversation with adults.

6

Tell stories, use books and sing songs.

Give your child the opportunity to experience lots of different reading material: books, newspapers, magazines, street signs or advertisements at the store. Find ways to use stories and songs every day with your child.

- Find a special time to read with your child every day, like before bed. Look at the pictures with your child and ask her questions about the objects, animals or people on the page. This is also a great time to tell family stories or create stories together.
- If a story or song is familiar, pause every now and then for your child to insert a word or sound to help finish the sentence, like: "Row, row, row your -- ?" This is another example of promoting what researchers call "Take-Turns Talk."