EARLY LANGUAGE – STRATEGIES FOR LATE TALKERS

When Should My Toddler Start Talking?

By approximately 12 months most children have one or two words they say with correct meaning and can follow instructions or orders and understand simple questions.

By approximately two to three years of age a toddler should be able to follow two-part instructions (Get your ball and bring it to me) and put together two or three words to talk about and request things.

A toddler is considered to be a late talker if they have a spoken vocabulary of less than 50 words at 24 months. The words do not need to be pronounced perfectly.

Why doesn’t my toddler talk?

For most children or toddlers, the reason they either don’t talk or speak very little is not known.

- Some children or toddlers suffer from ear infections, which cause hearing problems. This in turns causes children difficulty in speaking.
- Some toddlers have specific difficulty in talking. They may find it hard to move their lips and tongues to make speech.
- Some children have other developmental difficulties of which being “late to talk” is only part of the problem.

Children or toddlers who aren’t talking ARE NOT LAZY – talking is something they may find very difficult to do, so it may be easier not to do it.

The most important thing to remember for your toddler to start talking is that he or she must WANT to talk. We must provide these late talkers with many opportunities for communication.

Best Results

To really see improvement in your toddler’s speech and language, we encourage frequent structured “play sessions” with one or two toys/activities. Try to remove any distractions (like TV, other children, phone, other toys). Try to pick a word or action that you want your child to try with each activity.

Adapt To Share A Moment

Choose 5 words that contain sounds the child can produce and structure activities around those words. Use the words when engaging in daily routines. Constantly repeat the words in different contexts until your child is able to at least approximate the word. Use turn-taking and show anticipation for your child to speak.
Allow your child to lead

When we are tuned into what children or toddlers are trying to say we can encourage them to say more. An important step in encouraging communication is taking time to:-

**Observe**

Look at what your toddler is looking at and watch his/her expressions. See what really interests them. This can aid in determining what they are trying to say through body language, sounds and words. It is also possible to use this interest to increase language, by responding to things that interest your child.

**Wait**

Give your child time to express ideas. Some children need longer to express their ideas and if we jump in too quickly, he/she never gets the opportunity.

**Listen**

Don’t “fill in the blanks”. If you never expect your child to answer, it’s likely he/she won’t. Listen carefully for any attempt to communicate, even if it's just a noise or gesture.

**Follow your child’s lead**

Structure language around things that capture their interest.

**Be face to face**

Get down on the floor to play with your toddler– don’t be an “armchair parent!”

Being at your child's level means he/she can see your face and mouth when you speak. This is especially important for children having problems with co-ordinating their speech muscles.

Encourage your child to look at your face and mouth.

**Let your child know you are listening**

**Imitate**

Copy your child's sounds, actions, expressions and words.

**Interpret**

Even if you’re not sure what your child means by his/her sounds, put the word you think he/she means to it. This gives your toddler a “model” to learn from.

Information taken from Vasse Leeuwin Community Health Service and Hanen Organisation. Compiled and amended by Natalie Harlond 2007
Comment

Talk about what your child is doing. This lets our children know we are interested in what they are doing.

Take turns

Having a conversation means TAKING TURNS. Your toddler must be able to take turns with games and toys and noises before you can expect your child to take turns with speech. You can practice taking turns with your child when playing games. For your child, a turn can be a noise, a gesture or a word. Make sure you respond to your child’s turn in the “conversation”.

Asking questions

“Good questions” keep the conversation going. They don’t need a “yes” or “no” answer.

Good questions to use are

- What’s happening?
- What do you want?
- Do you want the cow or the pig? (NOT Do you want the cow? → No/Yes answer only)

Asking too many questions can limit the language your child uses. If your child is not answering your questions, STOP and try some other strategies as well.

Modelling

Instead of asking questions, tell your child the answer! This gives him/her a model of the word to use in that situation.

If your toddler shows you something, name it.
If your child is doing something, talk about it.

Imitation

Incorporate sounds into nursery rhymes, books and songs which are rhythmic and repetitive. (eg Old MacDonald).

Use open mouth sounds and try turn taking (eg Tarzan call, ooo noises, Indian call)

Play

Children learn a range of skills through play.

Play is fun, so teach your child skills while playing.
Use things your child enjoys – by doing this you don’t have to get your child’s attention, you already have it.

Spend time every day playing with your child.

**Repeat, repeat, repeat...**

Children need to hear new words over and over again before they start to use them.

Children learn to understand what a word means before they use it. By repeating words over and over again, we help out children to understand the meaning of the word. Eventually, he/she will start trying to use that word in the same way.

**Expansion**

Once your toddler starts to use some words, we need to teach him/her to start putting the words together.

Use the **REPEAT + 1 WORD** rule to help you.

That is, repeat the word your child has said and add another word to it.

This rule can be applied to go from one word to two words, two words to three words etc.

A good way to use this technique is to put a describing word or a doing word (verb) in front of the target (usually a noun/object word). Using the ball example, we can now expand your child’s use of ball for all the functions below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>VERB</strong></th>
<th>Roll ball</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Throw ball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Go ball</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**DESCRIBING WORD**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blue ball</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Big ball</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Round ball</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**NEGATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No ball</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ball gone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**EXISTENCE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>This ball</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**RECURRANCE**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>More ball</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**POSSESSION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>My ball</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

**LOCATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ball up</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ball there</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**SOCIAL**

| Ball please    |

**Vocabulary Building**

Use words that have sounds similar to the ones that your toddler already knows.

Use simplified versions of adult words to encourage language eg wawa for water.

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Use short and simple sentences (even though you child will be able to understand much longer comments and instructions) as this will enable them to imitate. (eg On. Shoe on. Put your shoe on. There – your shoe's on.)

Hold objects near your mouth when you say the words so your child can copy your mouth movements.

Model words with sounds that your child knows and words with sounds which are easier to produce such as /m,b,d,w/, reduplicated words like mama, dada and simple vowel words (eg eye, ow)

How to help your child with sounds

Encourage your toddler to watch your mouth as you say a word. You can do this by holding the picture or object next to your mouth as you say the word.

If your child says a word with the wrong sounds, say the word correctly. Don’t expect your child to copy the word correctly, nor will he/she definitely say it correctly in the future.

Praise and Encouragement

It is very important not to forget to praise your toddler for communication attempts. Remember, talking is difficult and praise is necessary to encourage your child to start talking.

Language Strategies for increasing expressive language

1. If the child wants something pretend not to know what it is and encourage him to tell you what he wants or needs.

2. In addition to number 2, provide the child with things that he or she needs help with, for example needs help to open a bottle as the lid is too tight, or to turn on a toy, and then get him/her to tell you what it is she/he wants you to do.

3. In activities, encourage the child to provide at least the last word in the sentence. For example in a book activity, you could use a phrase such as “This is a …” and the child completes the sentence.

4. When involved in an activity ask simple questions such as “What’s that?, What’s happening? and What do you want?”

5. Provide the child with alternatives so he/she has to tell you what he/she wants. For example Do you want the ball or the mirror? As opposed to Do you want the ball?, which just requires a yes or no answer.

6. Eat a desired food or play with a preferred toy in front of the student without offering any to him/her. Give only a small amount when the request is made, to facilitate repeated requests.
7. Offer a non-preferred food item to elicit a protest.

8. Activate a wind-up toy; let it deactivate and then hand it to the student.

9. Open a jar of bubbles, blow bubbles, then close the jar tightly and give the closed jar to the student.

10. Initiate a social game with the student (e.g. tickles, tossing up in the air, etc.) until they express pleasure, then stop the game and wait.

11. Set up a game, leaving out one important part (e.g. dice, spinner, game piece) and say, “let’s play.”

12. Blow up a balloon and slowly deflate it. Hand the deflated balloon to the student or hold the deflated balloon up to your mouth and wait.

13. Start putting a puzzle together but keep a piece, so that there is one missing at the end.

14. Select an object that your child desires and place it in a container.

15. Set up for painting or a craft activity without glue or paints.

16. Tell your child they can go outside to play, but leave the door locked.

17. Put a familiar toy together the wrong way (e.g. put the arm in the location for Mr. Potato Head’s hat.)

18. When swinging in the playground, give a few pushes. Then hold the swing and wait.

19. Sing a favourite song and pause mid song. Wait for your child to fill in the words.