

How to support children's spoken language.

Children can struggle with lots of different aspects of expressive language - for example, learning vocabulary, finding words when they want to use them, sentence structure, answering questions or explaining things clearly. Here are some general strategies you can use in order to support expressive language skills.

Check that your child understands

Children who struggle with expressive language can also have difficulty with comprehension. Make sure your child understands what you're talking about by asking questions or saying it again in a different way. If you are concerned about comprehension, work on this first.



Comment instead of asking questions

This can be hard to do! Don't ask too many questions, as it can make your child feel under pressure. They will talk better when they feel relaxed. Often, a better way is to comment on what's happening. When your child is playing freely, give a simple commentary on what they're doing.

eg "The train's going over the bridge....
Choo choo.... Oh no, crash!"

This works because you're giving your child the words and phrases they might want to use in a far less pressured way as well as talking about what they're interested in. Leave lots of pauses and you may find your child starts to fill them.

Take time

We all feel pressured if we think that we need to say something quickly. This can make it difficult to find the right words to express ourselves. Children are just the same. Take time over what you're saying and pause regularly. When possible, let your child know that there is no rush. You can do this by directly saying it, or by letting your own voice and body language give the message. We all tend to imitate the way that someone talks to us, so slowing your own rate of speech just slightly will help your child feel less rushed.

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Add a word

When you're saying a sentence back for your child to hear, add another word or two to what they said. It's important not to go overboard with this – the idea is just to show them language one stage further on than they are currently able to say. So, if a child says "Sit on chair" rather than responding with "Yes, that big teddy looks really comfy sitting on that soft chair", instead say "Yes, teddy's sitting on a chair".

Use context

The best way to learn any word is in context. So, the best way to teach past tense verbs is to talk about what has just happened. The best way to teach idioms (eg pull your socks up"), is to use them in an appropriate context and then explain what they mean. If you're teaching new words, use them as often as you can in context. We all need to hear a new word many times before we remember it. This is even more true for children with speech and language difficulties. Use a new word, then use it again. Refer back to it later that day. Try to use it again a few days later. The more your child hears the word in context, the more likely it is to be stored well in their brain and found more easily when they want to use it.

Use other methods as well as speech

This may include signing, gestures, pictures, communication books or other devices. Whatever method you are trying to help your child use as well as speech, the best way to encourage it is to use it yourself.

Show them how

Show your child how to say things. It's best not to keep correcting them or telling them that what they have said is wrong, but say it back to them with the errors corrected so that they can hear a good example.

eg If they say "I goed to the park", you might say "Yes, you went to the park".

Offer choices

Often children find it hard to know how to respond to open questions. Try offering a choice instead. This helps them to remember and use specific words.

eg instead of saying "Do you want to draw?" try "Would you like to draw or build a tower?"