

Guest column

Handing Out Word Gifts

By Lynn Epstein



Most kids have about a 1,000 word vocabulary by the age of 3. Babies quickly learn to coo and imitate raspberries. Then suddenly, they become toddlers repeating those choice words you used in the car to describe Coast Highway traffic. By age 4, sentences are longer and more complex. By 5, children's verbal reasoning skills are blossoming as lots of "how" and "why" questions are being asked. Speech is intelligible 85% of the time. So for most children, language development is automatic. What happens if it's not?

Currently, 1 in 91 children are diagnosed with autism, which is a social language impairment that often includes difficulties with language processing and expressive communication skills. Other variables that may contribute to communication delays include complications at birth, large families, working parents, exposure to multiple languages and chronic ear infections.

So what do you do when your child is not repeating words or building speech skills? How do you teach a moving target! There are ways to make them talk.....

Engineering the Environment

Many times parents and caregivers anticipate the needs of their children and eliminate the necessity to use words. Instead, try to engineer the environment so that language has to happen for things to occur. Create communication opportunities. For example, you pour a wee bit of orange juice into a sturdy cup so your child will have the opportunity to ask for "more". You are at the park with your child on the swing. Stop it mid swing, so your child can tell you "go" or "push me." You offer choices vs. asking yes/no questions. So, even though you know the answer will be apple juice, present two choices ("You want milk or juice?"). The choice helps your child to label objects and build vocabulary vs. nonverbal responses like pointing and nodding. Toddlers need to practice making requests, (Want juice.), commenting, (Look, plane.) and demonstrating concept knowledge (Two more. All gone.) and describing (Big bubble.).

Modeling

Use language targets that your child can hit. If your child is only using single words, then trying to get them to say, "I want the apple juice box, please," is not going to happen. Even if your child may understand long sentences, provide a language model your child

can attempt with success. If your child is deleting sounds, exaggerate that sound in words during the day. Make sure you have your child's attention when you give your models.

Being John Madden

During play, give the play-by-play breakdown. Be John Madden and add a little communication color to play time. Using simple phrases and sentences to talk about what's happening; "cars go fast", "it goes up", "I got it", "whoa, loud!"

Get Down and Dirty

Part of a toddler's job is to explore. In adult terms that means

get messy! And it's worth it. Help them experience world through the five senses, by splashing in mom-made water tables made of deep pots and Tupperware, popping bubbles, marching to music, or finger painting with chocolate pudding. That makes for fun meaningful learning. Plus there's language in the clean up! Kids love soapy sponges and wiping things off with washcloths.

By making small ongoing adjustments to your expectations, provide language models and wait for responses, you can help grow communication skills and shift your child from pointing and grunting to using words. If have concerns about your child's speech language development, please contact your local speech language pathologist for a consultation.

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Regular columnists Ann Christoph and Amy Kramer, absent in this edition as well as last week, should resume their regular spots beginning next week.