



Strategies for Encouraging Your Child's Speech and Language Development

Piece-by-Piece: This strategy is useful when playing with toys or items that include multiple pieces (e.g., puzzles, blocks, dolls, arts and crafts, etc.). Instead of providing the child with all of the pieces at once, the adult communication partner only provides the child with a few pieces. By temporarily withholding some of the pieces during an activity, this creates opportunities for communication interactions between the child and the adult communication partner. For example, Johnny wants to play with a puzzle, so the adult provides him with the puzzle board and 2 puzzle pieces. Because Johnny does not have all of the pieces, he must then initiate communication (e.g., "More please," "Piece please," "I want more") with his adult communication partner in order to continue playing with the puzzle. This strategy also works well with food items. For example, instead of providing a child with 20 pretzels at snack time, the adult provides the child with only 5 or 10 (knowing that the child will most likely request for more). Holding back items briefly can encourage positive communication opportunities.

Out of Reach: This strategy is helpful for encouraging communication opportunities by placing desirable items out of reach from a child. An adult communication partner purposefully puts an enticing item (e.g., exciting toy, yummy food, etc.) on a higher shelf or in a container where it is visible, but inaccessible to a child. By placing this item out of reach for the child, a communication opportunity has just been created. A child might point at the desired object, lead others to the item, or even attempt to use words to make a request for the object, thereby promoting more communication. For example, Susie loves to play with bubbles, but her teacher always places the bubble jar on a shelf in the classroom where she cannot reach them on her own. Susie can see the bubbles on the shelf, but cannot reach them. This situation prompts Susie to ask her teacher for help getting the bubbles (e.g., "Help please," "Bubbles," "Bubbles please").

Wait, watch and listen: How many times have we listened to a child without really listening? How many times have we anticipated a child's need and not given him the chance to ask? When we do this, we take away an opportunity for a child to work on putting these new wonderful vocabulary words together into sentences. This strategy encourages us to wait for the child's communication attempt, watch how he uses all of his abilities, and listen to to the result. Is there an error? Then repeat the question or statement correctly and then answer it. Did another child not understand? Repeat and add a gesture for support. Did the child not respond immediately to your comment or request? Wait a moment and allow the child time to process. Repeat the comment or request again and add a gesture for support. We want to provide every opportunity we can for a child to put together his best sentence or respond his best way before jumping in.

Follow the child's lead: This is a strategy that encourages the child's communication partner to really focus on what the child is playing with, looking at and talking about. As we know, preschool children live and learn best in the "here and now." The more our interactions with them focus on what they're interested in at the moment we're communicating with them, the more likely we are to give them the language they need to talk about those interests. If Abbey is playing in the sand, talk to her about what she is doing with the sand- "you're digging in the sand, that's a big hole, dig, dig, dig,..." It may be tempting to talk to her about what she did earlier, or what she might do next, but modeling the language for her that relates to what she's interested in RIGHT NOW will enable her to talk about her interests to you later.

Limit closed-class questions: When conversation is the goal, this strategy encourages adults to avoid Yes/No questions or those that require only a one- or two-word response. Although these questions often get a response out of a child, there is no need to keep talking. Closed questions require a one or two-word response or even as little as a nod of the head. They can also be the type that are elicit right or wrong answers, making kids feel as if they're being quizzed. Examples of closed questions: What's your favorite color? Is that your toy? Are you hungry? If you want to have interesting conversations with kids, ask open-ended questions. Open-ended invite kids to imagine, elaborate, and tell stories. You'll get more information and get to know your child better when you ask open-ended questions. They let children think and solve problems. Here are some examples: What do you think will happen now? If you were the cook, what would you fix us for dinner? Open-ended questions allow children to express whatever they're thinking. They don't demand a response, but leave space for the child to answer thoughtfully. They encourage creative thinking, problem solving and imagination. Plus, when you take the time to listen to a longer answer, you are sending a strong non-verbal message that you value your child and his thoughts and ideas. Comments (information talk) work wonders too!

