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## 11 Essential Skills for Talking

There are eleven basic skills that children need to develop understanding and expression. Without these skills language development is delayed, develops differently, or doesn't develop at all. If your child has trouble with any of these skills, they should be assessed by a professional.

The idea of 11 Skills Toddlers Master Before Words Emerge is from Let's Talk About Talking by Laura Mize. Her web site, [www.teachmetotalk.com](http://www.teachmetotalk.com) has many wonderful resources for both parents and professionals.

### 1. Responds to What is Happening Around Them

From shortly after birth, your child should be aware of what is happening around them and show responses. You should see a newborn startle when they hear a loud noise. They might blink, stiffen their bodies, or start to cry. By 3 months babies should recognize familiar voices. Mom's and Dad's voice should help the baby to calm down. By 6 months babies should notice when someone comes into the room. They should turn their heads towards the person and look at them. By 9 months most babies will respond to their name. When you call their name, they should stop what they are doing and look at you.

To respond to information your baby needs to be able to take it in. They need to have good hearing and good vision. Babies often have a hearing test shortly after birth. If they didn't or if you have concerns regarding hearing, your baby's hearing should be tested or tested again. Some babies may develop hearing loss later in childhood. Causes of late onset or progressive hearing loss in children can include genetics, frequent ear infections, other infections like measles or meningitis, a head injury, exposure to damaging levels of loud noises, and secondhand smoke. Newborns who need an extended period of neonatal intensive care may also be at an increased risk for hearing loss when they get older.

A simple startle response to sound may show that your baby is hearing something, but it doesn't show what exactly they are hearing. To develop good speech and language, children need to clearly hear all sounds from low frequencies to high frequencies. Hearing loss can affect just certain frequencies. Your child may startle when you clap your hands, but they might not be hearing everything. Good hearing testing looks at all the different frequencies needed for speech and language.

By four months most babies can focus on and follow small objects. If you have any concerns regarding your baby's vision, it should be tested. It is much harder to make a connection between objects and what they are called if vision is impaired.

Catching hearing and vision problems early makes a huge difference in later development.

### 2. Responds to People

More than just responding to the environment, children need to respond to people. Communication is the back-and-forth interaction between people. Some babies will start to smile as early as three months when they see familiar faces. Four-month-olds might squeal when they see mom and dad. Babies as young as 8 months old can recognize and react to emotions. Researchers found that babies know when another baby is upset and will look to a parent for help. (Liddle MJ et al. 2015). By 14 months most babies try to physically comfort other babies that were upset.

If babies are not consistently responding to people and we know that they are hearing and seeing well then there might be a delay with social language. Social language is our ability to interact and communicate with others.

## What Can Delay Talking:

Most children are born to talk. The neural connections that we use for language as adults are hardwired into our brains. The vast majority of children learn to talk but there can be bumps along the way that can cause problems and delays.

### **Hearing**

Children need to hear speech sounds and language to understand what they are hearing and to learn how to use sounds to communicate. Hearing is something that I always ask parents about and get checked if there are any concerns or if it hasn't been tested. Infant's hearing is often assessed at birth and is an excellent way to catch problems early. But blockages in the ear canal, fluid from ear infections and other damage can happen later on. Children who have difficulty making speech sounds often have a history of significant ear infections. Good hearing at birth does not guarantee good hearing throughout childhood.

A good hearing assessment ensures that your child is hearing quiet sounds at all the different frequencies needed for speech and language. A child might be hearing some frequencies but not others. You cannot test hearing at home. A child might respond to a clap behind their back but this doesn't mean they are hearing all sounds well.

Hearing problems can easily be missed. A long time ago, after recently becoming a therapist, I went home to my small town to visit my parents. A neighbor came by to show off her baby. I think the baby must have been around 2 or 3 months old. We played with her and marveled at how cute she was and all the sounds she was making. The next time I went home, my mom told me that the neighbors had recently moved. The baby's hearing test found that she was deaf. The family decided to move to a city where she would have more services. I know now that children, even those who are completely deaf, will start to coo and do some babbling. These sounds will gradually stop as infants need to hear themselves make noise to be motivated to continue. When I think back about this little girl, I believe that if I saw her today, I would not have had any better idea that she couldn't hear.

Every child's hearing should be assessed by a professional. This is even more important if you have any concerns and if your child is having any sort of delay.

### **Decreased Face-to-Face Interaction**

Children learn through interaction. The best interaction is real life face-to-face, back-and-forth with others. If this is lacking, then development will be delayed. Sadly, this most basic interaction, what infants naturally crave and do everything they can to illicit, is absent more and more. Parents are often not paying direct attention to their children. They are not gazing into their eyes waiting for a response. Too often parents are distracted by phones and tablets. Worse yet, children are too often given phones and tables for a distraction. Screens are very engaging, but they do not teach children to talk.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (2017) reported that for children between 6 months and 2 years of age, every 30-minute increase in daily handheld screen time was associated with a 49% increased risk of expressive language delay. They recommend that infants and toddlers (under 18 months) have no screen time and that children 2-5 years have limited screen time - up to one hour per day. I would take these same recommendations and apply them to parents. If you are with an infant, you should not be using or looking at a screen - any screen. If you are with a toddler your screen time should be very limited. You cannot provide a child good face-to-face interaction if you are looking at a screen.

## What You Can do to Help

If your child seems to be a late talker, if you don't have any other concerns, then the following ideas should help, and they might be all you need. If you do have other concerns, then the ideas still may help but they are not all the support you or your child needs. Children who have additional concerns need to be assessed by a professional.

Parents are their children's best teacher. Parents know their children best and are the ones who are around them the most. This means that parents are the ones who have the most powerful impact on their child's development. I have learned that the best way to help a child is to give the parent the tools and support that they need.

Helping your child to learn to talk is often very simple and straightforward. The following ideas and strategies are the same ones that I give to parents to work on at home. Often parents tell me that they are doing these ideas already. I'm sure this is true but making yourself aware of what you are doing and thinking about how your child learns is always a good thing. This can help you to focus on doing more of what helps.

The ideas are not in any certain order. Mostly they move from broad general strategies to ones that are more specific, but all the ideas are important, and each one can help your child learn to talk. Read over each and think about how it might apply to you and your child. Try each idea and watch to see what happens. Focus on ideas that make sense to you and seem to have the most impact on how you interact with your child and how they respond to you. If you and others are seeing steady positive changes in your child, then what you are doing is making a difference. If you are not seeing progress, please seek professional help.

### **Observe**

Start by carefully watching what your child is doing. What do they like to play with. What happens when something interrupts what is happening. What sounds are they making. What body and hand movements do you see. What is your child looking at. These observations will give you opportunity to interact with your child and try the ideas that follow.

Hanen, an excellent early childhood language program from Canada, uses the acronym OWL. Observe, Wait and Listen. I like to add in Stop. Stop what you are doing and then OWL. You can't be a good observer if you are talking, looking at your phone or thinking about what's for supper.

### **Face to Face**

Get down to your child's level so you are face to face with them. When your child is at the same level as you, it makes it easier for them to watch your eyes so they can tell what you are looking at and to watch your mouth so they can see how you are making the different speech sounds. Your child needs to make the connection between what you are looking at and what you are saying to learn to understand what words mean. She won't understand that you are talking about her bear unless she can see that you are looking at her bear. When she watches your mouth, she is learning how to make different speech sounds. These are two basics early skills needed for talking.

When you are at the same level you can see what your child is looking at. This tells you what they are interested in. You can watch your child's face and can react to how they are feeling.

Being at the same level helps to encourage eye contact for both of you. Eye contact builds a social connection and helps to let your child know that you are paying attention and are listening to what they