



Early Language: Communication Strategies

A guide for parents and carers to support early communication at home

Developmental Milestones Before First Words

You may be concerned that your child isn't using words yet. Many other developmental milestones come before first words. Supporting these skills lays the foundation for language to emerge. Some of these milestones include:



Cause & Effect

Realising actions produce outcomes — pressing a button makes a toy light up; crying gets attention.



Turn Taking

Using a sing-song voice and pausing so the child "talks" back with jargon or sounds.



Vocalises to Objects

The child holds objects and vocalises a variety of consonants or vowels while looking at them.



Imitates Sounds

Copies raspberries, animal noises, and 'silly sounds' — interested in watching your face and mouth.



Joint Attention

Sharing interest in the same item: child looks at you, then the airplane, then back at you. The child follows the point of a communication partner.



Social Games

Initiates peek-a-boo, chase, or rolling a ball. Looks to you to continue the game.



Imitates Movement

Claps to copy you; plays "How Big?" by putting arms out wide.



Pointing

Points to show you things, ask what something is, or tell you what they want.



Gesturing

Waves bye-bye, puts arms up to be picked up — using body to communicate wants.



Social Referencing

Glances over while playing to make sure you're watching them slide cars down the ramp.

Early Communication Strategies

Be Connected

- Children learn language best through natural, meaningful interactions with adults, family, and friends.
- They thrive when they feel safe, connected, and understood.

Be Face to Face

- Get down to the child's level so they can see your face, expressions, and how words "look" when you say them.
- Being face-to-face signals you're ready to play and connect on their terms.

Follow Their Lead

- Join in their play by following their interests — start alongside them, then gradually join in.
- Comment on what THEY are doing without taking over.
- Observe the details: are they focused on the ball or the spinning? The car itself or the wheels?
- Matching your language to what they see and do helps them make the associations they need to learn words.

Support Communication Attempts

- First give them space to try. Then gently interpret and verbalise what you think they're trying to say.
- Provide a clear model without expecting repetition.
→ *Child reaches for a blue hat → "I want the blue hat" / "Blue hat!" / "Blue hat, please."*
- Adjust your language to match their current skill level. Don't say "say". Instead, model what the child would say if they could say it.

The 3:1 Rule – Comments Instead of Questions

- Too many questions can limit spontaneous communication. Aim for three comments for every question.
→ *"Your car is driving fast!" or "That's a BIG car!" or "My car is sloooow!" – then WAIT.*
- Apply this during everyday routines: sandwich-making, bath time, bedtime, or dressing.
- Try "wondering aloud": "I like it when it's warm outside" or "These flowers are pretty!" then WAIT.
→ *Instead of "How was your day?" try "It looks like you had a fun day!" – then wait.*

+ The +1 Rule

- Once the child uses about 50 words, they begin combining words. Model one word more than they say.
 - Child says "ball" → You say "big ball"
 - Child says "up" → You say "pick up"
- Don't expect them to copy you – wait for an opportunity, but never pressure.

💬 Think and Talk Aloud

- Talk about what you're doing. This links words to real experiences and models reasoning.
 - "I'm planning a picnic tomorrow – what should we buy?"
 - "I'm looking for the apples... oh, here they are! I like red apples. Let's put them in the trolley."
- Allow the child to respond. If they don't, model possible answers.

🔄 Verbal Routines

- Use predictable phrases repeatedly with the same activity.
 - "Ready, steady... (WAIT) ...go!"
- Create routines for toys, books, snack time, bath, or dressing.
- Always model first, then pause. Use facial expressions to show you're waiting – make it fun, not demanding.

🎵 Building Receptive Language

- Use songs or tactile routines to encourage participation and understanding.
 - Sing a body-parts song daily – have the child touch their toes when you say "toes," open/close eyes for "eyes."
- Continue labelling and waiting during play and routines – give them time to respond and show understanding.

👉 Give a Reason to Communicate

- Set up opportunities by:
 - Withholding an item briefly (without causing frustration)
 - Giving choices
 - Placing items just out of reach
 - Bubbles: model "open" a few times, then give them the bottle and wait for them to ask.
 - Basket & ball: shoot the ball in, then hold it and wait for "ball" or "my turn."
- Great activities: wind-up toys, balloons, snacks in pouches, toys in jars, and people games where the child needs you to take action (encouraging "again!").



Communicate for Two Reasons in interactions

- **One reason is:** Build understanding of the world.
 - **Another reason is:** Provide models of what they could say.
 - Adjust your language depending on your goal:
 - Slightly longer sentences to teach understanding
 - Language or sounds at their level when modelling speech that you think they may be able to copy
- i.e. *Making popcorn: narrate the whole process (for their understanding), then model "POP POP!" (to provide them with a model of a word/utterance that they could potentially imitate).*



Read with Your Child

Reading together is one of the most powerful things you can do for your child's language development. It builds vocabulary, listening skills, narrative understanding, and a love of literacy — all at once.



Make it Enjoyable and Interactive

- Show that reading is fun and a special time to connect — your enthusiasm is contagious.
- Follow your child's lead: focus on pictures or parts of the story that interest them, rather than reading every word.
- Let your child hold the book, turn the pages, and point to things they notice.
- Use words that orient your child to the book: "cover", "title", "pictures/illustrations", "words", "letters," etc.



Ask Questions and Listen Actively

- Pause throughout to give your child chances to comment, ask questions, or share what they're thinking. Wait — don't rush to fill the silence.
- Mix up your question types:
 - Completion: "The cat sat on the..." (pause)
 - Recall: "What just happened to the bear?"
 - Open-ended: "What do you think will happen next?"
 - Life connection: "Have you ever felt like that? When?"
- Expand on what they say: child says "dog!" → "Yes, a big fluffy dog — he looks excited!"



Build Vocabulary

- Pause on new words and explain simply: "Enormous — that means really, really big!"
- Point to pictures to connect new words to their meaning.
- Revisit favourite books — repetition helps new words stick.

- Explore categories in pictures: "Can we find all the animals?" / "Can you name other fruits we know?"

Support Narrative and Thinking Skills

- Talk through event sequences: "First the egg cracked, then the chick came out — what happened next?"
- Discuss characters' feelings and reasons: "She looks worried. Why do you think she might feel that way?"
- After finishing, briefly recap: "What happened in the story? Who was your favourite character?" Refer to 'beginning', 'middle', and 'end'.

Explore Sounds and Phonological Awareness

- Choose rhyming books and emphasise rhyming words with your voice: "cat and hat, moon and spoon!" — pause for your child to supply the rhyme.
- Clap out syllables in longer words: "di-no-saur" (3 claps) — make it playful.
- Point out words starting with the same sound: "sss-sun, sss-sea, sss-sock!" Focus on the sound, not the letter name.
→ "That's the same sound as your name — S, S, Sam!" (say "sss," not "ess")

Print Awareness

- Occasionally run your finger under the words as you read to show that print carries the message.
- Point out familiar words or letters your child might recognise — their name, "Mum," "dog."
- Let your child "read" along for repeated or predictable phrases they've memorised.

Tips for Making it Work

- Even 10–15 minutes of shared reading a day makes a meaningful difference.
- Any book counts — board books, picture books, non-fiction, even catalogues or cookbooks!
- If your child wants to read the same book over and over, go with it — repetition deepens learning.
- Library visits are a wonderful way to explore books together without the cost.