

Language-building Tips for Parents of Young Children Who Communicate Without Words

These tips are for parents of children who communicate using a combination of sounds, gestures (e.g. pointing, shaking head for “no”, waving “bye”) and eye gaze (looking at you and then at what he is “talking” about). These children are sending clear messages, just not with words. Have fun building your child’s language skills the Hanen way!

1

Put the child’s message into words

When your child sends you a message (e.g., by reaching, pointing, looking, making a sound, etc), put into words what you think he is trying to tell you. Keep it short, however, using a short sentence to capture his message. For example, if your child kicks his legs wanting you to push the swing for him, say “You want Daddy to **push!**” or “OK, I’m gonna push you”.

Stop talking and wait – to give your child a chance to communicate

Just get close to her, look interested and wait for her to send you a message. For example, if a baby is crying and your child is watching the baby intently, **don’t say anything**. WAIT for her to communicate with you. Once she looks at you, points at the baby and makes a sound, for example, then you can respond to what you think she is “saying” – i.e., “Yes, the baby is crying”. Waiting quietly, but looking interested, gives your child a chance to **start** a conversation – and starting conversations is a very important part of becoming a good conversationalist.

2

3 Pause during a familiar routine to tell your child it’s his turn

When you and your child are doing something that can be repeated over and over – like “Tickles” or swinging on a swing – **pause** during the activity from time to time. For example, after you have tickled your child, stop the game and **WAIT** for him to let you know that he wants more tickles (and **don’t say anything** – just look expectant!). Or, after pushing the swing a few times, stop pushing, and wait (**without saying anything**) to see if he will “tell” you to push the swing again. This will encourage your child to “tell” you to continue, allowing him to experience the power of communication.

Use “fun” words

When playing with your child, use “fun words” and “fun sounds”, like “wheel!”, “boom!”, “yucky!”, “pop!”, “oink oink”. These words and sounds will catch your child’s attention because they are usually said with a lot of intonation. In addition, these fun words and sounds can be repeated several times during an activity, giving your child lots of opportunities to hear them. Words like “wheel!” and “crash!” can be incorporated into play with cars and trucks. “Pop!” and “uh oh!” can be used during play with bubbles. “Splash!” is a great word to use during bath time. “Bang!” and “Boom!” are great words to use while banging on a toy drum. “Yummy!”, “mmmmm!”, and “yucky” are naturally occurring fun words during meal times.

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The possibilities are endless! These “fun” words and sounds are often the first “words” children imitate and, in time, say themselves.

5 Imitate your child's sounds and actions

Imitation is a great way to get an interaction going. When your child bangs on a toy drum, take a turn and bang on the drum too. Then wait to see her reaction. If she says "Oooh" while you blow bubbles, say "Oooh" back, then look at her to see if she has noticed you. If she pushes a car across the floor, do the same, then wait for her reaction. Imitation is a very important skill for your child to learn. Imitating her encourages her to notice you and even imitate you, if she is ready for this.

6 Talk with your child during everyday routines and activities, using the same vocabulary

When you use the same phrases and vocabulary with your child during everyday activities, he will be exposed to familiar, repetitive vocabulary on a daily basis. For example, while getting him dressed in the morning, talk about putting on his pants, his shirt, his socks, etc. When you wash his hands, you can say things like "Let's turn on the water..." "The water is nice and warm." "Let's wash you with the soap" "Can you dry your tummy with the towel?" Remember to **WAIT** after you say something to give him a chance to communicate using actions, sounds, gestures etc. When your child hears familiar words and sentences in the same contexts every day, it helps to build his understanding of language.

7 Use gestures, actions, and demonstrations when you speak to your child

While talking about a bird up in a tree, **point** to the bird while you talk about it. When telling your child that it is time to go out, you can **hold up the car keys** or **point to the door**. If you are about to wash your child's hands, you can **make hand washing actions**. These actions and gestures help your child understand what you are saying. It also provides him with examples of nonverbal messages that he can use himself. Gestures are thought to be a "bridge" to learning to say the words.

8 Offer your child a choice

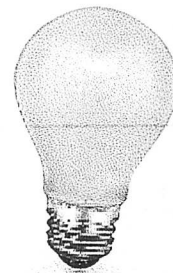
Offer your child a choice so she can send a specific message about something she would like. Hold up two objects and show each object as you say its name. For example, ask, "Do you want some apple or some banana?", showing the apple in your hand as you say "apple", and showing the banana as you say "banana". Your child will likely send you a message in her own way to let you know what she wants. She may look at the item she wants, reach toward it, point to it or make a sound while looking at it. As soon as she lets you know what she wants, give it to her. This allows her to experience the power of communication!

9 Be face to face

When playing with your child, get down so you are at her physical level, eye to eye. Sit facing her when she is in her high chair. Sit or lie on the floor when she is playing on the floor. In this way, your child can see and hear you better, and the connection between the two of you will be stronger. Children love it when adults are right down at their physical level! Plus, you will see your child's focus and interests and will pick up even the most subtle attempts to communicate.

10 Ask fewer questions!

When children aren't talking yet, it's easy to get into the habit of asking them lots of questions. But if your child isn't using words, it can be difficult for him to answer most questions. In addition, your child learns a lot when you **give** him information as opposed to **asking** him for information. Try to reduce questions, balancing them with comments (or statements). Comment about things in everyday life that interest your child. Instead of asking, "What are you making?" as your child squeezes some play dough, comment on he's doing, such as, "Oh, you're squeezing the play dough". Instead of asking "What's that?" while your child looks at a picture of a giraffe in a book, you could comment "That's a tall giraffe!"



Language-building Tips for Parents of Children Who Have Just Started Talking

These tips are for parents of children who have started to use single words or who have started to put two words together (e.g., "dog" or "Mommy go"). Have fun building your child's language skills the Hanen way!

1

Be face to face with your child

Get down to your child's physical level whenever possible. When you are face to face with your child, he is likely to communicate more as he sees you are right there with him, interested in what he is doing. It will also help you pick up whatever he is communicating and see what he is interested in. Children love it when adults get right down to their level!

If your child mispronounces a word or uses incorrect grammar, there is no need to correct him

Respond to mispronunciation or incorrect grammar by repeating the word or phrase correctly, and then carrying on with the interaction. For example, if your child says "poon" while pointing to a spoon, respond by saying "Do you need a spoon?", adding special emphasis to the word "spoon" as you say it. There is no need to correct your child or to ask him to say the word again. By letting him hear how the word sounds, without being corrected, your child will feel encouraged and will have all the information he needs to learn the correct word when he is ready.

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3 Encourage pretending

Once a child begins to use words, we usually see the first attempts at pretend (imaginary) play, which builds language skills. Encourage pretend play by providing simple pretend toys (use realistic, miniature objects, such as toy food and dishes, puppets and stuffed animals, toy people and vehicles, etc). Give her one set of toys at a time (e.g., food and dishes) and watch to see how she uses them. Then join in the play, but follow her lead, doing what she's doing (avoid telling her what to do). Once in a while, add a new pretend idea to the play by demonstrating a simple action with the toys (e.g., blowing on a cup of "tea" because it is too hot). Then wait to see how she responds.

When in doubt, don't hesitate to imitate

If you're not sure how to get an interaction started with your child, imitate his actions and sounds. For example, if your child is pushing a car across the floor, get your own car and push your car across the floor too. If your child is making a sound ("vroom"), you can make that sound too. If your child notices you and repeats the action or sound, imitate him again. In this way, your interaction will take off!

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5 Make your best guess when you don't understand your child

When you can't understand what your child is saying, look at the context and at what she seems to be looking at. This might help you figure out her message. Then make your best guess, based on this information. If you can't guess, try imitating what she has said. Sometimes, when they see you trying to understand what they are saying, children will attempt to send their message a second time with a little more clarity.

Ask choice questions to help your child use a word

Offer a choice between two items (e.g., "Do you want an **apple** or a **banana**?"), holding the items out when you say the words. In this way, your child hears the word modeled within the question which makes it easier for him to respond, **especially if the last word is the one you think he wants!** And if your child isn't ready to use the word, he can always reach for or point to the items you are holding.

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7 Use familiar daily routines as opportunities for your child to communicate

Pause at a key moment or interrupt the routine to give your child a chance to communicate. For example, hold your child's shoe in your hand before you put it on. Or playfully give her a fork for her yogurt. In this way, your child will be encouraged to communicate. If she uses a word, that's wonderful. If she sends a nonverbal message, reward her communication by saying a word or short sentence which reflects her message (e.g., "You want daddy to put on your shoe", or "Silly me! You need a **spoon** to eat your yoghurt!"). It's best not to overuse this technique— it is designed to be fun, not to frustrate your child.

Expect your child to use a word at some times but not others

Don't be frustrated if your child uses a word at some times but not others. When children first learn to talk, they need lots of practice using a word before it becomes part of their regular vocabulary. Continue to respond with enthusiasm to all of your child's attempts to communicate (verbally or nonverbally) by responding with what you think he is trying to say. For example, if he sometimes says, "wawa" for water, but at other times (e.g., when you are getting his bath ready), he just makes sounds, don't be tempted to insist he say "wawa". Just say, "Mommy's putting **water** in the tub. Oooh, the **water's** nice and warm." The more times he hears the word, the easier it will become for him to remember how it sounds and to say it himself.

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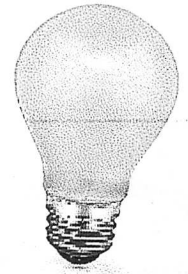
9 Use gestures when you speak to your child

Gestures are an important part of communication and will help your child understand what you are saying. For example, if you want your child to wash her face, pretend to wash your face as you say, "Okay, **wash** your face". Or, if you are asking her to go and get her shoes, point to the shoes while you give the instruction. Gestures also provide your child with examples of nonverbal messages that she can use herself. In addition, they are thought to be a "bridge" to learning to say the words they represent.

When your child says a word, expand on his message

When your child says a word or two words, help him learn the next step by **expanding his message**. You do this by turning the one or two words he has said into a short, grammatical sentence. For example, if your child says "on" when you turn on the lights, you could say "The **lights** are on". Or if your child says "car" wanting you to push the car, you could say "OK, Mommy's gonna **push** the car." By hearing you expand his message, your child is learning the next step in using language, which he will use when he is ready.

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Language-building Tips for Parents of Children Who Talk in Sentences

These tips are for parents of children who talk in sentences consisting of a few or many words. Have fun building your child's language and literacy skills the Hanen way!

1

Give your child a chance to start a conversation with you

During meal time, wait silently for your child to show or tell you something. Then comment with interest on what he has said or done. For example, if he says that he doesn't like his food, ask why and have a conversation about what you like and what he likes. If he comments on something you are doing, say something in response and then wait again for him to say something. Starting conversations is a very important social skill, which needs to be encouraged in young children.

Use everyday routines to encourage back and forth conversation

Language is learned during back and forth conversations in everyday activities. It's important to make sure your child is given a chance to take at least 2-3 turns before the conversation ends. There's a lot children can learn from talking about everyday events. Let your child help you unpack the groceries, put laundry in the washer or use a plastic knife to cut up fruit. Encourage conversation by talking about what you and she are doing and how this relates to family members. For example, when cutting fruit, talk about how good she thinks the fruit tastes, which fruit has pits and which don't, which family members like which fruit etc.

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3 Encourage pretend play

Pretend play provides wonderful opportunities for your child to use more advanced language. For example, by pretending, she will learn to use language to create a pretend object or situation (while holding out an empty toy cup, she says, "Here's some tea") and she will learn to "set the stage" for a pretend scene (while pointing to a large cardboard box, she says, "This is our house and I am the Mommy." Join in by taking on a pretend role yourself within the scenario your child has created – but let her lead the play.

Be flexible about how you read a book to your child - and follow his lead

There's no need to read a book from cover to cover! If your child is interested in one particular page, spend time on that page. If he wants to go back to that page, go back to it and talk about it again. You don't have to read every word on the page or every page in the book, unless your child really wants that. It also helps to pause periodically so that he has a chance to think and then say what's on his mind. Following your child's lead makes book reading interactive, which increases his opportunities to learn.

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Talk to your child about reasons for things he sees

There are many things your child won't understand - why police cars have sirens, why there are traffic lights, why dogs have leashes, as an example. To help him, explain these things to him. For example, "The dog has a leash so he can't run away. If he runs away, he could get lost and then his owner won't know where he is." Even if your child doesn't understand everything you say at first, you are introducing him to many important ideas, which will contribute to his understanding of his world.

Encourage your child to tell stories

Storytelling is an important skill because it involves learning to use very clear, specific language about something which is no longer present. It can be fostered by talking about stories related to family members and events. Share your family photo album with your child and encourage him to use the photos to talk about past experiences with family members. You may need to help him by adding details or by clarifying who did what and where. It takes lots of practice with both listening to and telling stories for children to become effective storytellers.

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Talk to your child about the print she sees every day

Show your child how print communicates all around her. Let her help you get the mail and then look at flyers and colourful advertisements together. Ask your child which pictures she likes and then read the words that describe those things, pointing to them as you read. Explain the purpose of the flyer - e.g. that supermarket flyers tell us how much food costs that week and that helps us decide what to buy. This helps your child understand that print "talks", just like spoken language does.

Make learning the alphabet a meaningful activity

When grocery shopping with your child, look at names of foods on the packaging and then point to and read the names for him. Also, point out the letters, especially the first letter in the word. For example, "Look, this says 'butter' and 'butter' starts with the letter 'b'".

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Help your child learn that words are made up of sounds

Learning that words are made up of sounds is an important skill in learning to read. You can help your child learn this during daily routines if you think of two words that begin with the same sound. Then tell your child, for example, "Ssilly soap. 'Silly' and 'soap' both start with the sound 'sssss'" or "'Bubble' and 'bath' both start with the sound 'buh'". Make sure you make the *sound* the letter makes and that you *don't say the name of the letter* (that's helping him learn the alphabet, but not the sounds in a word). It takes children a long time to be able to identify the sounds in words so don't expect your child to do this himself for a while.

Encourage your child to experiment with writing, even if she can't write

Provide materials during pretend play that will encourage your child to try to write any way she wants. For example, for a "store", provide grocery-store ads, empty food containers, paper, markers and tape so she can make signs, write prices etc. If she asks for help and wants to know how to spell words, tell her. If not, let her do it her own way - she is learning a lot from experimenting with the printed word. Letters and spelling do not have to be correct for her to be learning important aspects of early writing.

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