

Helping your child communicate effectively

Many people are surprised to learn that language development starts from birth. Babies begin to communicate by using eye contact and turn-taking games. As a parent, you can encourage this back and forth play and lay down the essential building blocks for language development. Below are some strategies that you can try with young children and the earlier you start the better!

Eye contact is an essential precursor to communication. This helps us to understand what someone else is thinking by watching their facial expression. It also helps to reference what you are talking about (Mum looks at cat and says 'cat'. Child looks at Mum and follows gaze to cat and hears the word 'cat'). Encourage eye contact from a young age by having close face-to-face contact with your baby.

Turn-taking is another important conversational skill. This can be encouraged with back and forth games or by simply talking to your baby. Even before your baby has started using real words you can have a 'conversation' by talking and leaving a space for your child to respond with a smile, gurgle or babbling.

As children get older, you can encourage communication by **doing something out of the ordinary** rather than anticipating your child's needs (eg give them their bottle without any milk in it). Take any kind of response as a communication attempt –some children will ask for milk while others may point or vocalize to let you know that you have forgotten something!

Always talk about what your child is doing. This is a good way to teach new words. As children get older and begin to use more words you can make your sentences longer, but initially use single words to **name everything** in your child's environment. Use the context of the situation to teach new words – teach food while shopping or cooking, teach clothing while your child 'helps' with the washing, teach body parts in the bath (eg. arm, here's arm, wash arm). Always repeat back what your child says to you and **praise** and respond to any attempt at communication (child says 'bo' for bottle. Parent says 'Good talking, bottle. Want bottle. Bottle, drink.' and gives child their bottle). This way the child understands that they can use communication as a way of getting something that they want.

Reading books is a good way to teach words that you don't encounter in everyday life. This is also a good way to increase concentration and attention skills. You can begin reading to your child from a very early age using large picture books and simply naming the pictures that you see. Using an animated voice during reading will help to keep babies and young children interested.