



# FACILITATE EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE AT HOME: TIPS FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

Expressive language refers to the way children share information. It can be a gesture such as pointing to a toy to express a request, or producing a string of words to form a sentence or tell a story. Here are some strategies that can help stimulate and improve expressive language skills.

**Note:** *The information below relates to children in early elementary school with expressive language delays. It is strongly recommended that you consult a speech therapist to ensure these activities are appropriate for your child's age and ability.*

- 1. Pause to provide opportunity .** We often anticipate what children want to say. It's helpful to pause quietly and allow your child to organize thoughts, make requests, or express choice.
- 2. Stage Situations** so that your child will use language to problem solve. A great way to stimulate language is to create a situation that is "silly" or out of the ordinary. Here are some ideas:
  - a. If you place an empty cereal box on the table and your child attempts to fill their bowl, you have created a reason to engage in verbal interaction.
  - b. Mealtime is a great time to interact and stimulate language. For example, give your child soup or cereal but hand them a fork instead of a spoon. You have just created an opportunity to talk about why you cannot eat the food in front of you and what you can do to solve the problem.
  - c. Place a favorite game within sight but out of reach. Have your child explain where the game is and what you can do to retrieve it. Do this in a playful way such as pretending not to see the item. Many kids may point and say "there!" Help them use more specific language such as "the car is on the shelf" Model expanded sentences with prepositions ("in" "on" "behind" "under" etc) to help them verbalize longer sentences as well as answer "where" questions.
  - d. Make "mistakes" such as giving your child the wrong shoe or sock. "accidentally" putting on daddy's shoe or the sock that belongs to baby sister is a playful way to stimulate sentences that use adjectives ("oh no that's too *big!*") or sentences that describe possession or ("That's not yours, that's *daddy's shoe!*")
- 3. Comfort is key .** Help your child feel at ease by reducing pressure they may associate with communication. Many well-meaning parents make the mistake of asking their child to speak in front of others "tell aunt Sally about your new toy" or "tell grandma what happened in school today." When a child has expressive difficulties, placing direct demands will likely reduce their willingness to verbalize.
- 4. Model** the communication style, sentence structure, and vocabulary you feel your child will be able to understand and use. A child will learn more from watching and listening . Often, modeling is more effective than telling a child what to say or how to say it.
- 5. When you read to your child** select simple books. When children listen to stories that are simple and familiar their confidence increases and they are more likely to answer questions. As you read, point to pictures and label objects and actions and ask simple questions. Pretend to forget names of characters or objects so that your child has the opportunity to verbalize what they know.

6. **“How Was School Today?”** Answering that question is challenging for some kids. Talking about past events (even if they happened only a few hours earlier) is difficult for children with expressive language difficulties. It may help to start a communication notebook with your child’s teacher. Ask the teacher to write an anecdote about your child’s day (e.g., “Sam sat with his friend Ricky at lunch today” or “We learned about butterflies in science”) Use these anecdotes to start a conversation with your child about their day. Before you return the notebook to school, write a sentence or two about your child’s activities (e.g. “Sam went to the movies with grandma on Sunday”). Adding a picture may be very helpful too. Ask your child’s teacher to engage in a 1-2 minute conversation about the information in the book. Include enough information so that the teacher can encourage responses to “who?” “did what?” “where?” questions.
7. **Creating is Communicating** especially when you do it together. Cooking activities, arts & crafts, and even building with Lego all provide opportunities for language stimulation. It’s the perfect time to *allow your child to give directions and make choices*. Ask questions such as “what should I do next?”
8. **“Fill in the Blank” Strategy** Make statements that will allow your child to use what they know to fill in the blank or finish your sentence. For example, if you are making a fruit salad you may say something like “We cut the apples and put them in the bowl. Now we should \_\_\_\_\_” When children struggle to find the right words it helps to provide starters and descriptions such as “We used that fruit that was red, round...it was a bit hard to cut...it’s an \_\_\_\_\_” Hopefully, Your child will jump in and say “apple!”
9. **Practice Recalling and Retelling** Help improve word finding and narrative skills by talking about the activity you’ve just completed. “How did we make the fruit salad?” Try techniques such as *pretending to forget* “What fruits did we use again?” or having your child *“teach”* someone else in the family “grandma wants to make a smoothie just like yours. Can you teach her how to make it” It’s also a good idea to encourage use of *sequence words* (“first” “next” “last”). This helps children organize their thoughts, produce longer sentences, and improve story telling skills.
10. **Expanding Sentences** A great way to model quality speech is by building on what your child has already said. Repeat the phrase that was said but use correct speech and add details. For example, if your child says “ice cream yummy” You can add “Yes! Ice cream is delicious. My favorite flavor is vanilla.”
11. **Play and Praise.** Model correct speech and avoid criticizing and pointing out errors. Create an environment where communication is a rewarding experience talking to each other is natural and fun. These games may help expand verbal
  - a. **Sequencing** cards or puzzles are commercially available and helpful for practicing simple story telling.
  - b. **I Spy** is a game that encourages use of adjectives. It teaches children to listen integrate information and take turns.
  - c. **Simon Says** provides opportunities to listen but also allows children to practice verbalizing sentences and seeing they’re words “in action” as others do what they say.
12. **Ask for help** If you are concerned about your child’s speech & language development consult a speech therapist. Don’t shy away from asking questions and seeking a professional’s opinion.

