

Tips for Encouraging Your Child's Expressive Language Development

1. Model short phrases throughout the day by talking about what you are doing and what your child is doing. These phrases should contain the repetition of key words. For example, when giving your child a bath, you can use phrases such as "gotta wash arm", "wash other arm", "now wash leg", "wash other leg", "wash belly", "wash wash wash", etc. If you want your child to say single words, reduce these phrases to single words (e.g., "wash", "arm", "leg"). If you want your child to use two-word phrases model two-word phrases.
2. Sometimes your child will be more likely to imitate a word if it is modeled with an action. For example, when walking upstairs, say "up" on each step. When banging with a toy hammer or hand, say "bang" each time. When swinging, say "wee" as your child goes back and forth.
3. Get in your child's way during the day so they have to communicate. For example, keep some of their favorite toys in containers they need help opening so they will have to request 'help'. If your child has a toy they like to play with that has an on/off switch, just it off in the middle of play and say "uh-oh, what happened" and encourage them to request that you turn it on. At mealtime, 'forget' to give them their spoon or their juice so that they have to request it.
4. When your child is using a less desired form of communication (e.g., grunting, pointing), model the appropriate word for them 3 times, pause, and then if they still have not imitated it, give them the desired object or activity while modeling the word again. If they imitate you at any point during this, give them the desired object or activity and praise them for using the word.
5. Offer your child choices throughout the day. This will help them learn to communicate even if just by gesture and it will build their vocabulary. For example, during playtime, ask the child (while showing each object) if they want to play 'ball' or 'blocks'. At mealtime, you can ask them if they want 'peaches' or 'pears'. During bathtime, you can ask them what to wash first, 'arm' or 'leg'. During dressing, you can ask them if they want to wear the 'blue' shirt or the 'red' shirt.
6. To encourage two-word phrases, each time your child says a single word, repeat it back to him with another word added to it. For example, if your child says "juice" to indicate they want some juice, say "want juice". If your child points to a car and says "car", say "look, car". If your child says "help", say "help me".
7. Avoid asking your child questions, such as "what's that?". A better way to encourage the use of words to start a sentence and then leave a blank at the end. For example, "Look, there's a _____" or "You've got a _____". Count to five in your head and if your child has not filled in the blank by then, model the word for them. This takes the pressure off of them of having to answer a question and it models an appropriate sentence for them to work towards.