



Talking So Young Children Understand

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How do young children learn to communicate?

Many people are surprised to learn that long before children say “mama” or “dada” they have already learned many important things about communicating. Even though babies cannot understand what is being said, it is important that caregivers talk to their babies.

Parents/caregivers who talk to their babies help their children recognize that sounds and words are important. When caregivers imitate their babies’ babbling and cooing, infants learn that their own sounds get a response. These are the first steps babies take toward understanding that language is a way to share important messages.

If babies are talked to often, they are usually able to say several words by their first birthday. They also will be able to understand many more words than they can say. For example, babies recognize their names

and can understand simple instructions, such as “wave bye-bye.” By this time, babies have learned that there is more to communication than just words. They know that frowning faces and smiling faces mean different things. They can



Strategies to help young children understand

People who are good at talking to young children are sensitive to children's developing language abilities. They are aware that young children are new at understanding language, so that talking to toddlers and preschoolers is different from talking to older children and adults.

Here are some of the strategies good communicators use to help children understand.

✓ Be sure to get your child's attention before speaking to her/him

Call your child by name and give her/him a few extra seconds to respond. Remember that young children are not able to quickly shift their attention away from something that interests them. You will know you have your child's attention when she looks at you. If she does not respond, go over to her and speak to her at eye level. Touch her shoulder and repeat her name gently. This simple physical action helps her learn that when you call her name, it is a request for her attention. Expecting to gain a young child's attention by simply calling or yelling her name is not realistic when the child's attention is elsewhere. In fact, calling your child repeatedly without making any other effort to get her attention may teach her to ignore you.

✓ Once you have your child's attention, speak simply

"Put your blocks away, wash your hands, and come to dinner," is asking your child to remember three different things. Young children have very short memories. It's hard for them to remember more than one direction at a time. In this situation, your child may put his blocks away but then start playing with something else because he forgot the other two instructions. Or he may only remember the last instruction and come sit at the table without cleaning up. Instead, focus on one instruction at a time. "John, it's dinnertime. Please wash your hands."

✓ When you are making requests, be specific

"Don't leave your toys on the floor" or "Pick up your toys" are directions that may not be clear to a young child. "Put your blocks back in the toy box" is a message that offers your child detailed information about what he needs to do. Your child wants to please you but he still needs to be reminded of what actions to take. Specific information helps. Better yet, show your child what you want him to do. For example, help him put the toys back in the toy box.

✓ Make important demands respectfully, but firmly

"Would you like to come in for lunch now?" "It's time for lunch, OK?" What do these messages imply? Adults understand them as a polite way to say, "Come in for lunch." However, to young children, these messages suggest that they have a choice of coming in for lunch or not. If you are not offering your child a choice, it is better to say, "Please come in for lunch now." This is a direct request given in a respectful way. Because young children understand only simple language, parents should make sure that they are not offering choices when they don't mean to do so.

✓ Talk with your child frequently

In the early years, parents/caregivers have a lot to teach children about being safe and getting along with others. Much of the talking between parents/caregivers and young children is about these things. Caregivers know, however, that it's important to take the time to talk with young children about other things, too. They ask questions about their children's ideas and activities. They want to hear about their children's experiences. They listen carefully. When parents listen to children and try to understand how they think and feel, children feel valued and respected. Parents also benefit from listening to their children. They understand and enjoy them more. Caregivers also have the satisfaction of knowing that they are building a good foundation for their relationships with their children.

✓ Set a positive tone

It is easier for children to pay attention to what you want them to do if your requests and instructions are offered in a positive tone. One way to be positive is to remember to use more "do" phrases than "don't" phrases. Saying, "Hold your cup with both hands" is more helpful and positive than saying "Don't spill your juice."

Another way to help children understand and obey adult requests is to use suggestions rather than commands. For example, "If you hold your cup with both hands, your juice won't spill." Good communication also avoids negative statements such as "You are so messy!" or "You're so clumsy, you can't even hold your cup right!" These messages cause hurt feelings and do not help a child understand what he should do.

In addition to positive language, positive actions can be helpful in gaining children's attention and good will. A parent who finds ways to use humor or encouragement when giving directions creates a positive environment in which a child may be more likely to listen and follow the parent's instructions.

For example, "It's time to put away your toys now. Let's count them as we put them away. Let's see how many you played with today. One . . . two . . ." This positive approach makes a game of the task. "Before you go out to play, please step into my 'beauty shop' to get your hair dried." This good humored request takes advantage of a young child's interest in pretend play.



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