



Build Your Baby's Understanding: Match What You Say to What's Happening at the Moment

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Babies' understanding of language begins long before they start to talk. Though they may not be ready to say words, building their understanding is an essential step on the path to language development [1]. As a parent, there are many things you can do to support your baby's understanding and build a solid foundation for her to use words later on.

What helps babies understand words?

A recent study found that the number of words 6-month-olds understand is linked to how often they hear words that relate to the objects that they see in their daily lives [2]. In other words, the more you talk about what's happening in the moment, the easier it will be for your baby to understand new words. This is because children develop language first through their experiences – what they see, hear, taste and, feel. As your baby hears you repeat words over and over, she will start to associate your words with her experiences. When she is ready, she will then start to say the words she understands.

Matching what you say to what's happening at the moment

The first step to building your baby's understanding is to pay attention what interests your baby and then talk about it. This means that you will be talking about the here and now – what your baby is seeing and experiencing right in the moment.

There are a few simple strategies that you can use to help your baby understand the world around her. These strategies come from the Hanen guidebook *It Takes Two to Talk: A Practical Guide for Parents of Children with Language Delays* [1].

Step 1: OWL

OWL stands for Observe, Wait, and Listen. Use this strategy to figure out what your baby is interested in and what she might be trying to tell you.

- Get face to face with your child, and observe what interests her – is she looking at the ceiling fan? Is she interested in the light coming from the window? By playing close attention to your child, you will see what has captured her attention.
- Wait to see if your child sends you a message – does she look at you? Smile? Move her arms? Treat any action, look, or facial expression as though she is trying to tell you something.
- Listen for any sounds your baby makes – does she babble when she spots a favourite toy? Does she giggle when her big brother makes faces at her? Again, treat any sound as though she is trying to tell you something.

Step 2: Follow your child's lead by commenting on what she's focused on at that very moment

Once you've used OWL to discover your child's interests, your response should match what she's focused on. Instead of talking about an unrelated topic, you can talk about what she's interested in. Here are some examples:

- If your child is mesmerised by a whirling ceiling fan, you could say, "That's the fan. The fan is going around and around."
- If your child moves her arms and smiles when she sees her brother, you could say, "There's your big brother, Ben. Hi, Ben!"
- If your child turns her head when you try to feed her, you could say, "You don't like this banana. This banana is too mushy."

Step 3: Make what you say stand out

Once you know what to talk about, you can make what you say stand out by:

- **Speaking in full sentences.** Infants respond to the prosody, or melody of our voices, and it's easier to pick up on this melody when we speak in full sentences. So when you are matching what you say to the moment, try to speak in short, grammatically correct sentences, and add enthusiasm and animation to your voice. For example, instead of just saying "fan" when your baby looks at the fan, you could say "That's the fan!".
- **Stressing important words.** Saying the word that relates to what your child is interested in a bit slower or a bit louder than the other words in your sentence. In this case, you would stress the word fan.
- **Showing** the meaning of words with a gesture, facial expression, or the actual object. In this example, you can point to the fan as you talk about it.
- **Repeating** important words. The more often you repeat important words, and the more often your child hears those words, the more it will build her understanding. Aim to repeat the key word three to five times in

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an interaction – as long as your child is still interested in what you are talking about! For example, when you observe your child looking at the fan, you can say, “That’s the *fan!*” (stressing the word ‘fan’ and pointing to the fan). If you wait, OWL again, and your child is still looking at the fan, you could make another comment, saying, “The *fan* is blowing on us.” If your child turns her attention to something else, make a comment about whatever has piqued her interest – making sure to always match what you say to what’s happening at that very moment.

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By using these simple strategies regularly with your child, you’ll be building the bank of words she understands and laying the foundation for her to use them when she’s ready.



For more tips...

Discover more ideas for building your child’s understanding in the [It Takes Two to Talk guidebook](#).

References

1. Weitzman, E. *It Takes Two to Talk: A Practical Guide for Parents of Children with Language Delays, 5th Edition*. Toronto: Hanen Early Language Program, 2017.
2. Bergelson E, Aslin, R.N (2017) Nature and origins of the lexicon in 6-mo-olds. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 114:12916-12921.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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