



The Road to Successful Communication

Why Interaction Must Come Before Language

Every parent is eager to hear their child use words and start putting sentences together. But did you know that the road to successful communication begins long before children start using words?

In fact, there's a long list of things a child must learn about communication before he can begin to communicate with words. And these important "pre-language" skills are best learned in one context – within the fun back-and-forth interactions the child has with the important adults in his life. That's why, when a child has a language delay, the speech therapist assesses both the child's ability to interact with others as well as his ability to express himself and understand what is said to him. The therapist will usually help parents encourage the child's interaction skills before moving on to language skills.

What is interaction and why is it so important?

From birth, children communicate using sounds, actions, eye gaze, and facial expressions. They don't realize that these sounds and actions have any

meaning until their caregivers consistently respond to them. In



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this way, children gradually learn that the messages they send without words have an effect on other people, and they start to send these messages intentionally.

Any time an adult responds to a child's message, either verbally or non-verbally, and the child responds back, an interaction has started. And it's within these early back-and-forth interactions that the foundation for all of a child's future conversations is built.

What children learn during these early interactions

When children have fun interactions with an adult, they learn a number of skills that help them become good conversation partners. They actually learn the basic rules of conversation – and all this happens long before they say their first word. They learn how to:

- initiate interactions with another person
- respond when another person initiates towards them
- take a turn at the appropriate time
- give the other person a chance to take a turn
- pay attention to the speaker
- send clear messages
- continue the conversation by taking additional turns on the topic
- clear up misunderstandings by repeating what was communicated or communicating in a different way
- stick to the subject
- initiate a new topic, when appropriate

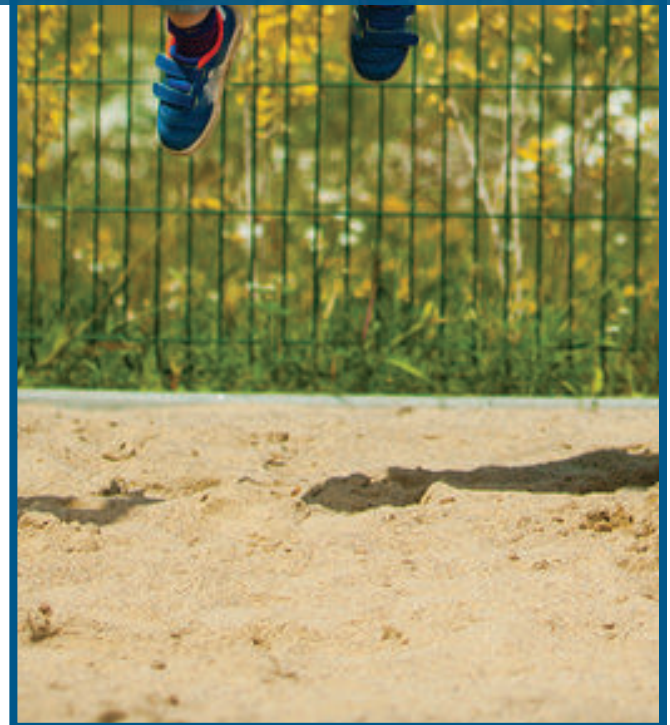
Since children learn language during conversations in everyday situations and activities, it makes sense that the better the child's ability to participate in interactions with caring adults, the more opportunities he has to communicate and learn language.

Tips for encouraging interaction

Here are some things you can do to build your child's interaction skills:

1. Make sure the interaction is fun and interesting for your child

A sink full of soapy water or a broken cupboard door can make for a fun interaction that goes back and forth a few times if your child shows interest in it. Watch him carefully. What is he looking at? What's he playing with? Which activities or routines does he like best? What's he trying to tell you? It doesn't matter what you communicate about – what matters is that your child is interested and engaged.



2. Respond with enthusiasm when your child communicates with you

Research shows that when an adult responds promptly and enthusiastically to the child's message, saying something that is related to what the child has communicated, this encourages the child's language development. Here's an example:

- 2 ½ year old Jacob, who has a language delay and uses about 10 words, tries to open a low cupboard in the kitchen, but can't because its handle has come off.
- He communicates by looking at Dad, pointing at the cupboard, saying "Duh!".
- Dad immediately goes towards the door, points to the broken handle and says, "The door is broken. See? We can't open the door." He tries to open the door.



In this way, Dad validates and encourages Jacob's attempts to communicate by letting him know that he heard Jacob's message and he's interested in it.

3. Keep the conversation going when your child responds again

The longer the interaction, the more opportunities a child has to practice communicating and to learn from what the adult says. For example:

- After Dad responds about the broken door handle, Jacob raises his hands, giving Dad a questioning look, as if to say, "What happened?"
- Dad says, "The handle came off! It's gone!" and he gestures "gone".
- Jacob replies by pointing to the handle again, imitating the "gone" gesture and saying, "Ga!" for "gone".
- Dad responds, "Yes. The handle is gone. I have to fix the door."

If you take a look back at the list of conversation rules a child needs to learn, you'll see how many of these skills Jacob was able to practice during this simple 6-turn conversation with Dad. And all because Dad responded with enthusiasm to something his son was interested in, and made an effort to keep the interaction going.

The Hanen Centre is a not-for-profit charitable organization committed to promoting the best possible language, literacy and social skills in young children. We provide parents and professionals with a variety of resources and trainings to help them maximize the early language learning of all children – including those with or at risk of language delays and those with developmental challenges such as Autism Spectrum Disorder.

For more tips and strategies on building interaction into every part of the day, visit our website and take a look at our It Takes Two to Talk® guidebook for parents of children with language delays.

