

Top techniques to develop children's speech and language

A guide for early years practitioners

Get the child's attention first

Get down to the child's level and engage their attention before speaking or asking a question. Young children find it difficult to listen and carry on with an activity at the same time. Saying their name first encourages them to stop and listen.

Imitate the child's language

With very young children, simply imitate their words and sentences. This will show them that you're valuing their words and will encourage them to keep on talking.

Use the full range of expression

Speak in a lively, animated voice and use gestures and facial expressions to back up your words. You'll be giving more clues about what your words mean, which can be very useful if the child is struggling to understand language. You'll also be demonstrating the importance of non-verbal communication.

Use simple repetitive language

Keep sentences short. Describe your everyday activities. As you talk about what you are doing ('I'm washing the cup.'), repeat your words slowly and clearly. Saying things more than once helps children to join in and pick up new words.

Use all the senses to help teach new words

Make learning new vocabulary fun and memorable. For example, if you're teaching the names of fruits, encourage the child to feel and smell the various fruits as they learn the words. Another idea is to use familiar songs and rhymes as a learning tool by missing out words for the child to fill in.

Be careful with questions

Try not to ask too many questions, especially ones that sound like you're constantly testing the child. The best questions are those that challenge the child to think rather than give an instant answer, like yes or no. Too many questions can easily block the flow of natural conversation.

Build on what the child says to you

Talking very clearly, add one or two more words to the child's sentence. For instance, if the child says 'look, car', you could say 'look, red car'. By doing this you'll be signalling that you've heard what they've said and modelling the next stage of language development.

Give the child time to respond

Children often need time to put their thoughts together before answering, so give them longer to respond than you would with an adult. Make sure to maintain eye contact as you wait for them to complete their remark.

Rather than criticise, demonstrate the right way

Praise the child's efforts, even if the results aren't perfect. If a child makes an error in a word or sentence, simply say the correct version rather than pointing out the mistake. For example, if the child says, 'I goed to the park', you might say 'Wow, so you went to the park'.

Make learning language fun

Play around with words, sounds and sentences. Don't be afraid to talk in funny voices or have daft conversations. The more children see you experimenting with language, the more likely they'll be able to do it themselves. And experimenting with language is a vital aspect of learning.

