

Preschool Speech & Language Development (Part III)

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How to help the development of the child's speech and language?

Once you have identified that a child's speech and language development is delayed, most parents want to know "What can I do at home to help my child's speech and language develop?".

Children learn by imitating the speech and language of others.

Children learn from watching and listening to their brothers, sisters and parents. Most children attempt to imitate the actions that they see others do. Have you ever seen a child pretend to "be Mommy or Daddy getting ready for work" or "be Mommy or Daddy preparing dinner"? They try to copy everything we do. Children imitate the sounds we make and the words we say. Children usually make their "first word" as an attempt of copying a sound that a parent has produced. Once children begin making sounds and words, parents can bombard them with thousands of new words.

How to produce good models?

Children with delayed speech and language may not be picking up on the models or be able to copy them because it is a little too difficult for them to try. "The carrot" is too far ahead of the "donkey cart". If the carrot (the words) seems too difficult to say, some children will not even try to copy it. If a child is using single words, you want to encourage him or her to use two words at a time. Using two or more words together is an important stage in language development because we begin using grammar (rules for combining words). To encourage using two words, try modelling two-word sentences, especially following a child's one word sentences. For example, when your child says "Juice", you can expand the sentence to two words by saying "More juice", "Juice gone", or "David's juice". Gradually, your child will see the pattern in your two-word sentences, and will try to copy a two-word sentence. When your child has mastered two-word sentences, you can begin modelling sentences with three words.

What if your child's speech and language is incorrect?

We do not expect children to learn how to speak correctly at once. They begin to speak using a simplified form of our adult speech. "Juice" can mean "I want my juice that is on the table, please". By expanding our models, a child will eventually say "I want juice, please". But some children will not always learn the correct way to say sounds or words. They might say "Me want doose" for "I want juice". It is important for a child's speech and language development, that their attempts to communicate are rewarded. "Me want doose" should be rewarded with juice. We also want the child to learn how to use the correct sounds and words by correctly modelling the sentence to them afterwards, without correcting them. When a child says "Me want doose", you can answer by saying "You want juice" and then "I like juice too". By slightly exaggerating the sounds and words that the child produced incorrectly, you can highlight them by pausing briefly before saying these words.

If you have concerns about your child's speech and language development, consult your family physician or a speech-language pathologist.

Reference source for articles: Parent Articles 1: Enhance parent involvement in language development, edited by Margaret Schrader, Ph. D., (1988).

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