

Learning to Talk: Methods to Encourage Speech in Infants and Toddlers

A child's first words can be difficult to understand; sounding more like gibberish than language. But it doesn't take long for language to take root – and most toddlers are able to make themselves understood by the age of 2 with a basic vocabulary of about 80 words. For some children, however, communication difficulties continue well beyond the age of 2. These “late talkers” speak very few words for their age, if any at all.

Late talkers show early signs of communication difficulties by about 18 months, when most children will start expressing themselves using about 10 well-chosen words. “Language is about interaction,” says Kristin Grabowski, speech pathologist at NCH Outpatient Rehabilitation. “Parents need to use lots of language when playing with their children.”

She, along with her colleague, NCH speech pathologist Maureen Casey-Coe, recommends

that parents incorporate “functional play” into their everyday lives to encourage communication, beginning as early as infancy. “Face an infant in front of you and play peek-a-boo. With toddlers, sit on the floor and pretend with them,” says Grabowski, who recommends always using appropriate speech when interacting with babies and toddlers. “Never use nonsense words,” she advises. “Always speak at or one level above your child’s ability. If a child is making sounds, use syllables, if making syllables, use words, expand words into phrases. Encourage the child to imitate you.”

Casey-Coe suggests that parents, family members and caretakers identify five “power words” such as eat, drink, cup, spoon and shoes that are used repeatedly, and then use those words as the foundation for simple instructions, such as, “Go get your shoes.” Casey-Coe says that she likes using baby sign language

to reinforce power words and to decrease a child’s frustration. “Show excitement too,” she suggested. “Say ‘vroom!’ when the car moves.”



Maureen Casey-Coe, left, works with Daniel Velasquez, age 18 months, utilizing a therapy approach called functional play to assist Velasquez with his language skills.

Tips to encourage Communication include:

Name objects around you regularly, don't stress articulation of a word, but always model correct speech

Make your child use words, or signs to get what he wants; never anticipate

Make funny noises and exaggerate for emphasis

Keep talking

For more information, contact NCH Outpatient Rehabilitation at (239) 624-1900 or visit www.NCHmd.org. The NCH Outpatient Rehabilitation Services Southeast is located at 8360 Sierra Meadows Blvd., Suite 100B, in East Naples.