

# Helping Your Child to Learn and Grow in the Early Years: A Guide for Parents

## Communication and Language

### What Is Communication and Language?

Communication and Language has three aspects – ‘Listening and attention’, ‘Understanding’ and ‘Speaking’. It seems obvious, but these skills are so important, and the best way you can encourage your child here is to spend time talking to them and listening to them. More often than not, when a child struggles in their first year at school it is partly or wholly because they struggle to listen to, understand or express language.

<p><b>Talk, talk, talk with your child</b></p> <p>– as much as you possibly can. Show them how to be a good listener in the way that you respond to them when they talk to you.</p>	<p><b>Share rhymes, songs, books and stories.</b> Talk about what is happening in the stories or rhymes. With a familiar rhyme or book, stop suddenly and ask your child to continue, or accidentally get the words ‘wrong’ – children love to correct you!</p>	<p><b>Play games which require listening skills.</b> Examples include ‘Simon Says...’, ‘I Spy’, ‘I Went to Market...’, or saying ‘Ready, steady, go!’ before starting a race or another activity.</p>
<p><b>Alliteration</b> is when words begin with the same sound. Being able to hear alliteration is also a key pre-reading skill. Emphasise the first sound in words – ‘Look, it’s a b-b-bear! What other words begin with ‘b’?’ Use letter sounds, not letter names at this point (‘b’ not ‘bee’). And don’t worry too much if your child confuses letters that can sound the same, for example suggesting ‘crab’ for a word that begins with ‘k’, or ‘ceiling’ for a word that begins with ‘s’. Eventually your child should be able to make collections of objects that begin with the same sound, e.g. pen, paper, penny, pig, potato. Make a scrapbook with a letter of the alphabet on each page and help your child to cut out or draw pictures to go on each page.</p>	<p><b>Listening &amp; Attention</b></p> <p>Early Learning Goal – Children listen attentively in a range of situations. They listen to stories, accurately anticipating key events and respond to what they hear with relevant comments, questions or actions. They give their attention to what others say and respond appropriately, while engaged in another activity.</p>	<p><b>Rhyme with your child.</b> Help your child to hear and recognise rhyming words – an essential step in reading as well. When you hear a word, say lots of rhymes for it, for example, ‘Look at that dog! It’s a frog, log, hog dog!’ See if your child can create rhymes in a similar way.</p>
<p><b>Listen for sounds.</b> When you’re out and about, stop and listen with your child. What can they hear? Maybe birdsong, or the sound of traffic, music or people talking.</p>	<p><b>Use an egg timer.</b> If your child struggles to stay focused, use an egg timer or stopwatch to gradually increase the amount of time they spend on a task. Praise and reward them for spending a good amount of time on a task.</p>	<p><b>Play an echo game.</b> Make a sound and ask your child to repeat it back to you. Change the sound. Ask your child to make a sound for you. You can make the sound using your voice, your body or by tapping on an instrument such as a toy drum.</p>

<p><b>Talk, talk, talk with your child</b> – as much as you possibly can. Talk to them about their play, about what is going on around them, and about stories that you share.</p>	<p><b>Ask your child to explain events or decisions they have made</b>, e.g. 'So this is a model of a robot. What does this button do?'</p>	<p><b>Make a record.</b> When you have a holiday, a day out or a trip somewhere, help your child to create a montage or scrapbook of objects, artefacts and mementos which you can talk about later.</p>
<p><b>Plan and discuss.</b> When starting something new, such as getting out the paints to make a picture or going on a trip to the supermarket, help your child to talk about the steps that you will need to take and the order they will come in.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Understanding</b></p> <p>Early Learning Goal – Children follow instructions involving several ideas or actions. They answer 'how' and 'why' questions about their experiences and in response to stories and events.</p>	<p><b>Develop early reading skills.</b> When you've shared a story, talk about the characters. Who was good, who was bad? What normally happens to the goodies and the baddies in stories? Ask your child to explain events in stories, e.g. 'Why was Jack's mum cross when he sold the cow for a handful of beans?'</p>
<p><b>Look at the world around you.</b> Develop early understanding of the world by asking your child to make predictions ('What will happen if we plant a seed and water it?'), explain events ('Why did the boat sink in the bath?'), see patterns ('What happens to the ball when we put it on a slope?') and speculate ('What if your tower falls down?').</p>	<p><b>Use picture clues.</b> If your child struggles to follow instructions, use picture clues or cards. Have a look at these <a href="#">Now and Next Cards for Parents</a>. Support your child to start understanding two-step instructions, such as 'Put your shoes away and then wash your hands.' Be aware that children are very good at picking up cues from what they see rather than what they hear, so will often copy another child or adult or take their cues from gestures.</p>	<p><b>Play 'pretend' games.</b> Get involved in your child's imaginary play and encourage your child to talk about what is happening in their imaginary world. You can do this simply by playing shops, dressing up, or playing alongside your child as he or she builds a model or constructs a train track.</p>

<p><b>Talk, talk, talk with your child</b> – as much as you possibly can. Studies show that children from families where talk features regularly, read earlier and have better attainment in school overall.</p>	<p><b>Don't over-correct.</b> If your child gets a word wrong, or has a problem with certain sounds, don't tell them they are wrong. Instead, repeat their sentence back to them correctly. E.g. 'Daddy goed to the shops.' 'Yes, that's right, Daddy went to the shops.'</p>	<p><b>Show your child how to hold a conversation.</b> Demonstrate this in your own talk, either with your child or with other family members or friends. Show good listening skills such as turn taking, making eye contact, and responding to what a person has said.</p>
<p><b>Sit down as a family and eat a meal every day</b> – without the TV or other devices. Studies show that families that regularly sit down together over a meal communicate better and have better long-term mental and emotional health. Mealtimes are a great time to talk about the day, find out if there are any problems and encourage your child to talk and listen.</p>	<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Speaking</b></p> <p>Early Learning Goal – Children express themselves effectively, showing an awareness of listeners' needs. They use past, present and future forms accurately when talking about events that have happened or are to happen in the future. They develop their own narratives and explanations by connecting ideas or events</p>	<p><b>Talk about your child's interests.</b> If your daughter loves painting, talk about why this is and what she's doing. Introduce great vocabulary such as colour names or words for pieces of equipment or techniques such as dabbing, stippling, printing. If your son loves to be outside, talk about what he can see, hear and feel. Again introduce great words to increase vocabulary ('The wind feels chilly against my skin.' 'Can you hear the birds twittering?')</p>
<p><b>Don't be afraid to use 'big words'.</b> Children love new vocabulary. A great game to play is 'Not just ... but ...' For example, 'My dinner was not just delicious, it was delectable!' 'Daddy Bear was not just cross, he was furious!'</p>	<p><b>Limit screen time.</b> Whilst many children's TV programmes, apps and games have value in teaching new words and ideas, they often encourage children to be passive learners rather than actively engaging with the world around them. Make sure that you also switch off your devices when you are devoting time to talking with your child.</p>	<p><b>Re-enact or retell familiar stories.</b> For example, you could find three bowls, three spoons and three teddies and help your child to retell the story of 'Goldilocks and the Three Bears'. Show your child how we can use words like 'first', 'then', 'next', 'now', 'after that' to show the order of events in a story.</p>

If you have any concerns about your child's hearing, attention or speech and language development, speak to their class teacher, who may decide to make a referral to specialist speech and language experts. Children can have difficulties with expressive speech (how they speak themselves), receptive speech (what they understand) or both. Expressive speech difficulties can be as simple as mispronunciation of certain sounds and can be remedied with a set of simple exercises. Receptive speech difficulties may require more work with your child on their understanding. Expert speech therapists will be able to offer support if this is needed.