



What Makes Your Child “Tick”? Using Children’s Interests to Build Communication Skills

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Have you ever been to a party and found yourself talking to someone with whom you have nothing in common? The conversation quickly goes downhill, with both of you feeling awkward and not having much to say. Conversely, chatting with someone who shares a common interest with you is easy and enjoyable. You don’t need to think about what to say next and you are motivated to share your ideas.

The same is true for children. Once we take a closer look at what captures children’s attention, and find ways to join them in their interests, we can interact with them in ways that build their communication skills. This premise is so important that the Center on Everyday Child Language Learning (CECLL) in the United States is dedicated to researching the effect of using children’s interests and everyday activities on their communication and language skills.

Why Use Children’s Interests to Build Communication?

Many studies have shown that children learn more effectively when adults engage them in everyday activities that are based on their interests. Recently, researchers at the CECLL compared 41 studies (which included over 4000 children altogether) and found that children had better communication and language outcomes when their interests were included into everyday learning activities. This was true for both children with and without communication delays and disabilities [1]. The researchers explain that including children’s interests is more likely to:

- motivate children to interact, and interact for longer
- provide parents with more opportunities to promote their child’s communication

Research has also shown that [2]:

- many of infants' first words relate to specific, motivating situations and activities
- toddlers and older preschoolers' language learning is often tied to specific events and activities

The bottom line....when caregivers talk about children's interests during motivating everyday activities, children are more likely to interact, pay attention, and learn new words.

How to Discover Your Child's Interests

While you might know many of your child's interests, taking a closer look might give you some new information. The first step in using a child's interests to build communication is to **observe his interests**. In order to observe a child's interests, you need to [3]:

- **be at his physical level** – this might mean lying or sitting on the floor, or sitting across from your child in his high chair.
- **be face-to-face** – so that you can see what your child is interested in.
- **wait** – instead of starting up an interaction, stop and wait to see what your child is doing first. Abandon your own agenda and make your child's interests your focus.

In order to gather information about your child's interests, you should observe your child throughout the day in as many activities as possible. You can write down your child's interests on a list, or fill out a checklist, such as the "[Child Interests Activity Checklist](#)" [4] developed by researchers at the CECLL. Thinking about the following questions can also help you identify your child's interests [5]:

What makes your child smile and laugh?
 What gets and keeps your child's attention?
 What gets your child excited?
 What are your child's favorite things to do?
 What does your child work hard at doing?
 What "brings out the best" in your child?
 What gets your child to try new things?
 What does your child choose to do most often?

As you start to gather information about your child's interests, you may notice that his interests can be grouped into two types of interests [6]:

- **personal interests** – these are a child's favourite things, such as cars, water play, or music.
- **situational interests** – these interests emerge when something about an activity, material, or person attracts a child's attention or invites him to become involved. Situational interest often occurs when a situation is new, interesting, or unexpected.

Imagine a child who loves water. This child loves to play in the bathtub, run through the sprinkler in the backyard, play in the water table at preschool, and pretend to give her doll

a bath. This child has a *personal interest* in water. Now imagine another child who is walking to school with his mother on a rainy day. Large puddles are forming on the sidewalk, and he begins to jump and splash in the puddles, laughing and showing his mother what big splashes he can make. This child has a *situational interest* in water which has emerged at that moment due to the puddles. If caregivers take advantage of these motivating interests and situations, children will have more opportunities to learn to communicate [6].

How to Use Children's Interests to Promote Communication

Once you know your child's interests, you can include them throughout the day to take advantage of all the opportunities for learning. Think about which interests [7]:

- occur most often
- fit easily into your family's schedule
- provide good opportunities for learning

For example, if your child likes cars, you might look at your daily routines and find that the following activities involve cars:

- riding in the car each day on the way to daycare
- going to the car wash
- filling up the car with gas
- reading books about cars
- playing with cars during play time

Then, within each one of these activities, there will be many opportunities to use his interest in cars to have longer interactions and conversations. For example, while playing with cars, you can **take turns** pretending to fill them up with gas, sending them down a ramp, or putting passengers inside. Or when you go through the car wash together, you can **talk about what is happening** as your car moves along the conveyor belt. Think of all of the language you could model during just one interaction about cars!

But always remember to follow your child's lead – let him show you and tell you what interests him about cars. Don't tell him what to do (e.g. "Now give my car some gas") or ask questions that test his knowledge ("What colour is your car?"). Rather, make a comment about what he's doing or what he's looking at, such as "That car doesn't have any tires!" or "Wow, that car is fast!" He'll enjoy the play more and will also learn more from this type of language.

The idea is provide your child with as many opportunities as possible throughout the day to communicate with you. Researchers at the CECLL point out that using a child's interests and everyday activities at home provides so many more learning opportunities than are possible during a speech therapy session. For example:

- Therapy twice per week accounts for only 2% of a young child's total waking hours.

- Preschoolers participate in about 50 different kinds of activities every day. This translates into about 100,000 learning opportunities each year, not counting the multiple learning opportunities that can happen within any single activity! [8]

Share Your Child's Interests

If you are working with a speech language pathologist, it is very important to share information with him or her about your child's interests and your everyday activities. Your speech language pathologist can provide you with ideas about how to incorporate your child's interests and which strategies you can use when you interact during these motivating activities.

By figuring out what makes your child "tick", you will be able to follow his lead and talk about his interests during everyday interactions and conversations. In this way, your child will be motivated to communicate with you, and you will find that you have more opportunities to help him learn vital communication skills.

H2 References

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