



Children Who Lead Get the Language They Need!

The Hanen Centre

Welcome to our special page all about Following Your Child's Lead – a key strategy in the Hanen early communication program, It Takes Two to Talk®.

Here you'll learn all about the importance of following your child's lead to build their language skills, and you'll find lots of tips and links to get you started.

What Does it Mean to Follow Your Child's Lead?

Following Your Child's Lead means **responding promptly with interest to what your child has communicated**.

Children learn to communicate during enjoyable back-and-forth interactions, and the longer these interactions go on, the more opportunities children have to learn. Following Your Child's Lead is one of the most powerful things you can do to extend an interaction that your child has started.

Why is Following Your Child's Lead so Effective?

- We all like to talk about things that interest us, and children are no different! They are much more likely to communicate with us when we focus on what they are interested in communicating about.
- Children tend to pay attention longer when they are interested in the topic, which means they'll stay in an interaction longer when it revolves around what they want to communicate about.
- When your child leads the interaction, sending you a message or telling you something either with or without words, it creates a low-pressure interaction in which they're more likely to communicate their ideas and stay in the interaction.

- Every time your child starts an interaction with you and you respond by talking about what they're focused on, they hear language that matches the things they're interested in at that very moment. That's when the best learning takes place. In other words, children who lead get the language they need!

Why is Following Your Child's Lead so Effective?

Studies show that children who engage in more interactions in which caregivers follow their lead tend to have stronger language skills [1]. This is largely because it's during these enjoyable, motivating interactions that children have more opportunities to take **conversational turns and to hear language from their caregiver that matches what they are focused on**. Research has shown that children who experience more conversational turns with their caregivers have stronger language skills and show more activity in the part of the brain responsible for processing and using language [2].

Does a conversational turn have to include words?

No! A conversational turn is anything your child does to communicate during an interaction, whether it's through body language or facial expression, using a gesture, a sound or words.

Tips to Follow Your Child's Lead

Paying attention to what your child is doing or communicating and then responding with interest sounds simple, but it's not always easy! This can be especially true if your child communicates in very subtle ways or prefers to play alone.

Here are four tips to get you started:

Tip 1: Observe, Wait, and Listen (OWL™)

In order to observe and listen to your child, you need to stop and wait, without talking. Waiting not only gives you the time you need to notice what your child is interested in, but it also sends your child the message that it's their turn, making it more likely they will send you a message. While you are waiting, observe your child closely to see what they are doing and how they might be communicating with you. Listen to any sounds or words your child uses. All of these things are clues about your child's interests in the moment.

Tip 2: Be Face-to-face with your child

Make sure you are at the same physical level as your child so you can see each other's faces. This lets you see what your child is doing and lets your child see that you are interested.

Tip 3: Abandon your plan

It's tempting to tell or show your child what to do or to ask questions in an attempt to get your child to communicate. However, the more you do or say, the less your child may communicate, resulting in an interaction that doesn't keep going. Instead, abandon your plan and just go with the flow! Follow your child's ideas and see where it takes you.

Tip 4: Join in and play like a child!

If your child isn't yet using words consistently, a great way to follow their lead is to get your own toy and copy what they're doing! If your child is pushing a train on the track, push your own train on the track, then stop and see what happens next. If your child is feeding a doll with a spoon, grab your own doll or stuffed animal and feed it or give it a drink, saying "mmm, he likes that!" or "That's yummy!". If your child speaks in short sentences, you might say a bit more like, "The baby likes that juice. Mmmm. It's delicious!" Remember to be playful and to wait after you take a turn to give your child a chance to take another turn.

When you Follow Your Child's Lead, you help them learn language by using words that match exactly what they are focused on in the moment. You're also building their confidence and excitement to interact with you, and that leads to longer, more enjoyable interactions that help you connect and have fun together!

More Information and Tips

Explore the links below for more tips and information to help you follow your child's lead and have high-quality interactions that build communication skills!

Articles

- *It's Quality, Not Just Quantity, That Helps Your Child Develop Language*
- *Three Keys to Help Your Child Learn Language*
- *The Power of Turn-taking: How Back-and-forth Interactions Help Children Learn Language*

Printable tips

- *10 Language-Building Tips for Parents*

Videos

- *Why Interaction Matters*

Hanen Resources

It Takes Two to Talk guidebook

The *It Takes Two to Talk* guidebook provides research-based strategies to build your child's language skills during enjoyable everyday interactions and activities. Lots of illustrated examples and checklists help you better understand your child's stage of communication and the best ways to help them learn.

Hanen Programs

It Takes Two to Talk program

The *It Takes Two to Talk* program takes place either in person or online with a small group of parents and a Hanen Certified Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP). You'll learn strategies to help your child learn language naturally throughout the day, and you'll have the chance to practice and discuss these strategies, as well as receive individual support from the SLP.

Watch the clip below to hear about the experience of a Dad who attended an *It Takes Two to Talk* Program. He talks about what happened when he started following his child's lead by building on his interests during a weekly routine.

Are you a professional who works with young children with language delays and their families?

Explore the following e-Seminars for tips to support parents to use responsive-interaction strategies, including Follow the Child's Lead, to build early language skills:

Collaborative Goal-Setting with Parents: Targeting Interaction Skills First

Helping Parents Use Routines to Promote Young Children's Interaction and Language Skills

Interested in becoming Hanen Certified?

The *It Takes Two to Talk* program takes place either in person or online with a small group of parents and a Hanen Certified Speech-Language Pathologist (SLP). You'll learn strategies to help your child learn language naturally throughout the day, and you'll have the chance to practice and discuss these strategies, as well as receive individual support from the SLP.

References

1. Masek, L. R., McMillan, B. T. M., Paterson, S. J., Tamis-LeMonda, C. S., Michnick Golinkoff, R., & Hirsh-Pasek, K. (2021). Where language meets attention: How contingent interactions promote learning. *Developmental Review, 60*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2021.100961>
2. Romeo, R.R., Leonard, J.A., Robinson, S.T., West, M.R., Mackey, A.P., Rowe, M.L. & Gabrieli, J.D.E. (2018). Beyond the 30-Million-Word Gap: Children’s Conversational Exposure Is Associated With Language-Related Brain Function. *Psychological Science, 29*(5), 700–710.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

For more information, please visit www.hanen.org.

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