

Make Words Stand Out with the Four S's!

By Lauren Lowry

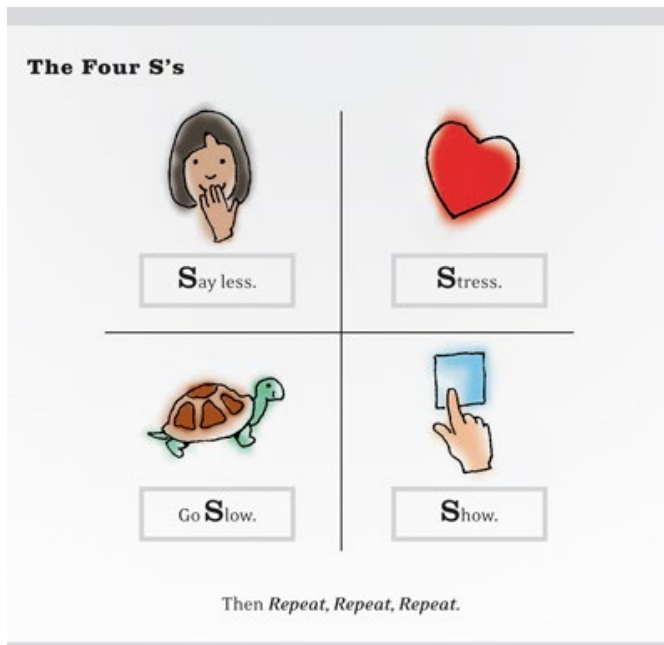
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Did you know that adults say between 120-200 words per minute during everyday conversation?! [1] That's a lot of words!

Now think about young children who are learning to communicate. They need to listen to that constant stream of speech, try to understand what is being said, pick out individual words that are important to the message, and eventually use those words themselves. Not an easy task! When children are learning language, they typically pick up new words from this stream of speech naturally, and they gradually increase their vocabulary over time. But for children who have difficulty with language learning, it takes a lot more effort. There are some practical ways to help these children. One way is to make words stand out with some small changes in the way you talk with your child.

The Four "S's"

Making words stand out in this stream of speech involves simplifying what you say. In *It Takes Two to Talk*®, one of The Hanen Centre's programs for parents, parents learn a strategy to make words stand out, known as the Four "S's" [2]. The Four S's is a strategy that highlights the words you use with your child so that they can notice them, understand them, and eventually use them.



Let's take a closer look at how to use the Four S's...

Say less means:

Use short, simple sentences with proper grammar – instead of “It’s time to put your shoes on because we need to go to the store to get some milk,” try a shorter sentence like “Let’s put your shoes on.” Don’t make sentences so short that you leave out the grammar – the grammar helps your child by giving clues about what words mean and how they are used in sentences. So, instead of “Baby cry,” say, “The baby’s crying.”

Stress means:

Make important words stand out with your voice – you can emphasize new words by using an animated voice or by changing the volume or tone of your voice. For example, when saying “The car is going fasssst!”, you can stress the word “fast” by saying it quickly and exaggerating it a bit. Certain sound effects and words are naturally exaggerated when you say them, such as “vroom,” “beep beep,” “uh oh!”, “wow!”, “oops!” and “whee!” When you use these sounds and words, they naturally stand out and catch a child’s interest, making it more likely they will notice them, remember them, and even try to say them.

Go slow means:

Speak a bit slower and add pauses – you don’t need to go too slow and lose the natural rhythm of speech. But slowing down the pace a bit gives your child time to process what you are saying. Then pausing after you say something gives your child a chance to say something themselves.

Show means:

Use actions, gestures, objects, and pictures while speaking – being able to see what words mean builds your child’s understanding. You can show your child what words mean by pointing to things or holding up objects while you talk about them. When you point to a plane as you say “Look, there’s a plane!”, it helps your child connect the word “plane” with the object in the sky. Other gestures and actions also show your child what words mean, such as raising up your arms when you offer to lift up your child, or shaking your head as you say “no”. Pictures are another great way to show what words mean. Showing a picture of grandma on your phone as you say “We’re going to grandma’s house” lets your child know what’s happening. Talking about the pictures in books as you point to them also helps your child understand what your words mean.

Repeat, repeat, repeat means:

Repeat words often and in different situations – Besides using the four S’s, you can also repeat words. Children need to hear words several times and in different situations before they understand, remember, and eventually use them. Try to use a new word several times during an interaction (but not all at once!). For example, when rolling a ball back and forth with your

child, you might say “I’m gonna **roll** the ball!” as you roll it towards your child. Then wait to see what your child does or says next. If they get ready to roll it back to you, you could say “You’re gonna **roll** the ball!”. As you take turns back and forth, maybe the ball will accidentally roll under the table. You could say, “Uh oh, the ball **rolled** under the table.” Saying new words in different situations also helps build your child’s understanding. For example, you could also use the word “roll” when rolling playdough together or if your child is having fun outside rolling down a hill!

The Four S’s in Action!

Here’s an example that shows how to use the Four S’s during an everyday activity.

Jason loves pizza. Mom uses the Four S’s at dinner time to make her words stand out:

Say Less – She uses a short, grammatical sentence (“Let’s eat pizza”)

Stress – She adds emphasis with a sound effect and exaggerates how she says it – “Mmmm”

Go Slow – She speaks slowly and then pauses afterwards to wait for Jason’s reaction

Show – She holds a slice of pizza in her hand to show Jason what she’s talking about

While they are eating their pizza, mom might be able to **Repeat** the word “pizza” a few times naturally during conversation. She might say things like “I love pizza,” “This pizza is yummy” or “Do you want more pizza?” After she says something about the pizza, she can pause and wait for Jason’s reaction, being sure not to take over the conversation and allowing him time to send his own messages.

Helping your child learn new words doesn’t involve special toys or flash cards. If you use the Four S’s while you talk with your child during everyday activities, you will build your child’s understanding. In time, and with lots of repetition, your child may start to use some of these new words on their own!

Looking for other tips to build your child’s communication skills? The *It Takes Two to Talk*® guidebook offers caregivers many practical suggestions for encouraging communication during everyday activities.

References

1. Rayner, K. & Clifton, C. (2009). Language Processing in Reading and Speech Perception is Fast and Incremental: Implications for Event Related Potential Research. *Biological Psychology*, 80(1), 4-9. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.biopsycho.2008.05.002>
2. Weitzman, E. (2017). *It Takes Two to Talk®: A Practical Guide for Parents of Children with Language Delays, Fifth Edition*. The Hanen Centre: Toronto, Ontario.

About The Hanen Centre

The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization committed to supporting all the important adults in young children's lives to build the best possible social, language and literacy skills. This includes children with or at risk of language delays/disorders, autistic children, and children who may benefit from social communication support.

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