



Take Language Learning Outside!

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Children love to play outside! There are so many things to explore outdoors – things that are different from their indoor experiences. Outdoor activities offer many opportunities for building your child’s communication. Here are some outdoor activities your child might enjoy, and some suggestions for adding language to these experiences:

- 1) **Sidewalk chalk or painting with water** – Children can have fun being creative on a variety of surfaces outside. “Painting” the backyard fence with water or drawing on the sidewalk or patio with chalk offers tons of fun without the clean up!

Communication tip – Don’t tell your child what to do! Grab your own brush or chalk, get down to your child’s level, watch what they do, and copy it. When your child communicates or says something to you, respond and show your interest.

- 2) **Physical play** – Take advantage of the space outdoors to play physical games with your child. There are so many games with movement for young children, including “Chase”, “Hide and Seek”, “What Time is it, Mr. Wolf”, and ball games. Some of the best physical games are ones you make up yourself!

Communication tip – Because physical games revolve around people instead of toys, this type of play encourages children to interact and communicate with others. You can encourage your child to communicate during these games by adding some “SPARK” to your physical play.

- 3) **Water and sand play** – Children often enjoy the sensory experience of playing in water or sand outside. If you don't have a water table or sandbox at home, you can make one by filling up a large plastic container with sand or water. Add toys and objects that will encourage communication and pretending, such as different items for scooping and pouring (cups, funnels, strainers, shovels, large spoons), items to bury in the sand (and then you can dig for buried treasure!), toy vehicles and people. If your child has a particular interest (e.g., dinosaurs, outer space), add some of those types of toys too.

Communication tip – if you include your child's friend or sibling, water and sand play can encourage your child to interact and talk with other children. Water tables and sandboxes encourage children to play near each other because they need to share the same space and materials. To encourage this type of play, make sure you have doubles of most of the toys. Because there isn't a right or wrong way to play with water or sand, there's no pressure for your child to have to follow specific rules. This means that your child can play their own way, which might help them feel more comfortable being around and communicating with other children.

- 4) **Going for a walk** – Going for a walk around your neighbourhood shows your child new sights and sounds. You can have conversations as you notice new things, or you could make up a scavenger hunt for items you might find on your walk. You could make a list of things to find ahead of time, and even add pictures to your list so that your child knows what items to find.

Communication tip – As you notice new things on a walk with your child, it gives you a great opportunity to have conversations. Just like when you speak with an adult, conversations with your child should go back and forth, with both of you having a turn to communicate. Even if your child isn't talking or uses only a few words, they should be actively taking part in the conversation! Your child might participate by using a gesture or action, making a sound, or saying a word or two. To encourage conversation, wait after you say something to give your child a chance to communicate. If you notice a bee on a flower, point to it and say, "Look there's a bee on the flower!", and then wait to see what your child does/says next. Children often need more time to think about how to take their turn in a conversation, so be sure to give your child enough time to respond.

By taking language learning outside, you'll create many opportunities for enjoyable interactions. Your child will be exposed to new things and will hear and learn the words that match these new experiences. Most of all, your child will be having fun, which is the best time for learning to communicate!

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.

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