

It's Worth the Wait! The Power of Waiting During Interactions with Your Child

*By Lauren Lowry
Hanen Certified SLP and Clinical Staff Writer*

If you have a young child, you've probably heard that talking to your child is critical for their language development. This is true - children need to hear language to learn language. But did you know that **not talking** sometimes is just as important? Let me explain....

When children are learning to communicate, they need many opportunities to start interactions, and they often need extra time to send their messages. If we (the adults in the child's life) do all of the talking, they don't get a chance to **start** an interaction and they don't have enough time to think before sending their message. When we take more "turns" in the conversation and do a lot of the talking, the interaction becomes unbalanced, and the child doesn't have as many opportunities to communicate.

To avoid this situation and encourage your child to communicate, **one of the best things you can do during interactions with your child is to WAIT expectantly.**

Waiting expectantly means....

- Stop what you are doing
- Be face-to-face with your child
- Wait quietly, without talking (for up to 10 seconds)
- Observe your child and notice what they're interested in
- Listen and watch for your child's message

Why waiting works

There are many advantages to waiting during interactions with your child:

- **Waiting helps your child start an interaction** – waiting lets your child start the interaction and gives you something to respond to. When you respond encouragingly to your child's message, they hear words that match their interests. At The Hanen Centre, we say, "Children who lead get the language they need!" because, when children take the lead in a conversation, the responses they get from their parents provide language that they can learn from. In addition, children who take the lead in interactions tend to be more motivated to keep communicating.

- **Waiting keeps the conversation going** – when you wait and your child starts an interaction, and you respond by saying something back, you then wait again. This lets your child know that it's their turn to do or say something again, and this keeps the "conversation" going back and forth.
- **Waiting shows your child that their message is important** – when you stop what you're doing, face your child, and wait, it shows your child that you are interested in what they want to show you or tell you. We all communicate best when our listener seems interested in what we have to say!
- **Waiting gives your child the extra time they might need** – children who are learning to communicate often need extra time to understand our messages and then think about the message they want to send. Waiting patiently and quietly gives your child the time they need.

What are you waiting for?

When you wait, you're encouraging your child to take a turn in the interaction, and their turn will depend on their stage of communication development. A turn could be any of the following:

- looking at you
- reaching for something or reaching towards you
- a body movement, such as jumping to get you to continue a jumping game
- giving you something, either to show it to you or to ask for something (such as giving you their cup, to ask for a drink)
- pointing or other gestures
- making sounds
- words or sentences

Your child's turn could be very subtle and easy to miss. That's why it's important to observe and listen closely while you wait. **As soon as your child takes a turn, stop waiting and respond by doing or saying something about what your child has just communicated.** For example, if they give you their cup, you can say "Let's get you a drink". If they put their arms up, wanting to be picked up, you could say "You want to come up! Ok!" and lift them up. Responding to your child's message right away lets your child hear words that match their message, which is very helpful for language learning.

Waiting sounds simple, but it's not always easy

During adult conversation, speakers talk back and forth with very little time between their turns. In fact, there's only about 200 milliseconds between the end of one person's sentence and the next person's! [1]. So, waiting for up to 10 seconds with your child might feel uncomfortable at first. Here are some tips to help you wait:

1. Get down to your child's physical level so you can easily face your child. This lets your child see that you are waiting, and lets you see your child's message.
2. Lean in and look expectant, letting your child know that it's their turn.
3. Count to 10 silently (in your head) while you wait. Of course if your child takes a turn after only a few seconds, respond!
4. When your child sends a message, respond right away and wait again.

How long should you wait?

The amount of time your child needs to take their turn will be specific to your child. Some children need 1-2 seconds while others may need 5-10 seconds before they send a message. For other children, if you wait too long, they may lose interest and the interaction will stop. Try to “read” your child – if they lose interest in the activity or stop engaging with you, it's likely you've waited too long. But if you give your child a little extra time, they might surprise you by communicating in a new way! If you've waited 10 seconds and your child hasn't taken a turn, you can try taking another turn yourself and then wait again.

The power of waiting can't be underestimated. Parents are often amazed at what their child is capable of when they are given a few extra seconds. Not only do they send new messages, but children are often really motivated to keep sending messages when their caregivers wait more often. Give it a try.... you'll likely discover that it's worth the wait!

Waiting is a strategy from the It Takes Two to Talk™ program, which includes many practical strategies to help your child communicate. You can learn more about the *It Takes Two to Talk* Program and *It Takes Two to Talk* guidebook on our website, www.hanen.org.

References

Meyer, A. S. (2023). Timing in Conversation. *Journal of Cognition*, 6(1): 20, pp. 1–17. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/joc.268>

Weitzman, E. (2017). *It Takes Two To Talk Guidebook*, 5th ed. 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.

Visit www.hanen.org for more information.

The Hanen Centre is a Registered Charitable Organization (#11895 2357 RR0001)