



# It's Never Too Early to Have Conversations with Your Child

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Parents know that talking to their young children is really important and helps them develop language, literacy, and thinking skills. But it's not enough for children to just hear lots of words – children need to have many back-and-forth conversations with their parents throughout the day in order to learn language [1].

These early conversations help young children learn to talk, but their impact lasts beyond those early words. A recent study counted:

- i. the number of words young children heard at home; and
- ii. the number of conversations they had with their parents during their daily life [2]

Then, they compared this to the children's language skills ten years later. They discovered that:

- Children who heard more words and had more conversations with their parents had better language skills ten years later
- Conversations had a bigger impact on children's language skills than the number of words parents said to their children

These results tell us that children learn to speak during everyday interactions with their parents about the things that happen in their daily lives. They don't learn to speak by listening to the words their parents say to them.

The take-home message is that conversations with young children make a big difference!

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## Never too early for conversations

If your child isn't talking yet, you might think it's too early to have conversations with him or her. But it's not! Conversations happen any time you and your child interact back-and-forth. Even babies have little conversations with their parents – a baby might make a sound and look at his mother, and then his mother says something back. Then the baby smiles, and then mom says something else. By taking turns communicating back and forth, they are having an early conversation, even though the baby isn't using words yet.

- Your child might start a conversation by:
- Looking at you
- Pointing to something
- Making a sound
- Getting your attention with an action or gesture
- Using words

When your child does this, continue the conversation by responding. Say something that matches what your child is doing at that moment. Try to guess what he or she is trying to tell you, and put that into words.

An early conversation might start like this :



*Jamie starts a conversation by pointing to his spilled juice and saying "pah." His mom continues the conversation by talking about the spill.*



*Robert likes to hide things for his mom to find. He starts a conversation by hiding a duck behind his back. Mom keeps the conversation going by asking "Where's the duck?"*

In these examples, the child does or says something and the parent keeps the conversation going by saying something back that matches what's happening in that moment. Next, the parent can pause and wait for their child to take another turn. The idea is to keep the conversation going back and forth a few times with the child taking another turn after his or her parent says something. This continues until the child loses interest or the activity ends.

When children have these little back-and-forth conversations with their caregivers, it provides them with many opportunities to hear words for things that catch their attention. Children also learn that their messages are important when their parents respond with interest to their efforts to communicate. This makes them want to communicate more often.

So the next time your child makes a sound and looks at you, and then you say something back that matches his message, remind yourself that you are actually having a little conversation! While this might not seem very important, you are actually setting the stage for the development of his language skills throughout childhood.



The tips in this article are drawn from *It Takes Two To Talk: A Practical Guide for Parents of Children with Language Delays*. This book shows you how you can promote your child's language at four different communication stages.

## References

1. 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.
2. Gilkerson, J., Richards, J. A., Warren, S. F., Kimbrough Oller, D., Russo, R., & Vohr, B. (2018). Language Experience in the Second Year of Life and Language Outcomes in Late Childhood. *Pediatrics*, 142(4), 1-11.

## 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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