



# Helping Children Develop Language for Thinking and Learning

By Lauren Lowry  
Hanan Certified SLP and Clinical Staff Writer

Is your child already using short sentences and understanding simple questions and instructions? If so, he's now ready for you to start adding slightly more complicated language during your conversations to expand his thinking and help him learn about the world. We call this "[language for thinking and learning](#)" or "decontextualized language".

Language for thinking and learning involves being able to:

- talk about experiences that happen in the past and future
- explain and describe
- use language to pretend
- talk about peoples' feelings
- use language to solve problems and make predictions

Children usually understand more than they can say, so while you might use shorter sentences to encourage your child's talking, you can also use longer or more abstract language (language for thinking and learning) to encourage his understanding. Research shows that when parents use more of this type of language, their children do too! [1]

## How to begin

At first, you can talk about things in the recent past or near future, like:

- "We're going to the park soon" (a few minutes before you leave)
- "The swings were fun!" (once you return home)

Or provide some short, simple descriptions and explanations, like:

- “My soup is really hot!”
- “Thomas has to go to the doctor because he’s sick”

This type of language may be slightly more abstract than your child is used to, but isn’t too many steps ahead of his level of understanding.

## Use language for thinking and learning during your everyday activities

Eventually, as your child understands more, you can extend his thinking and understanding further by using more abstract language during your daily activities. Try to use language for some of the reasons listed in the box above. For example, when you go to the grocery store, you can:

- provide explanations: “Those grapes are soft because they’re not fresh. Let’s not buy those ones.”
- talk about your feelings: “I’m so excited about seeing your cousins tomorrow! What should we buy to take to their house for dessert?”
- talk about your past experiences: “Remember when we had pie at Sarah’s house – it was so delicious! Should we buy some apple pie today? “
- solve a problem: “This bag is really heavy and might break. I think we’d better use two bags.”

The idea is to **use language that goes beyond the “here-and-now”** and broadens your child’s thinking and understanding. There’s no need for special toys or activities – you can use the language for thinking and learning anytime, anywhere!

## Extend your child’s thinking with books

A great time to use language for thinking and learning is when sharing books with your child. Books provide countless opportunities to talk about how characters think and feel, to provide explanations and predictions about the story, and connect the story to your child’s past experiences.

Language that goes beyond the “here and now” broadens your child’s thinking and understanding.

The key to using language for thinking and learning during book reading is to **use comments and questions that extend your child’s thinking**. Try to avoid simple, here-and-now language like “He’s swimming” or “The car is red”, as well as questions that are too concrete like “What’s that?” or “What colour is the car?”, as this type of language doesn’t challenge your child to think beyond the pages of the book or connect the story with his own experiences.

Instead, try to think of comments and questions that go beyond the story and use language for thinking and learning. Try to provide descriptions and explanations, talk about the characters’ thoughts and feelings, and draw connections between the story and your child’s experiences. Here are some examples of questions and comments that use language for thinking and learning:

- “Oh no, the bus has a flat tire! Now what are they going to do?”
- “I think he’s going to run away when he sees that big dinosaur!”
- “Do you remember when you ate too many cookies and felt sick, just like the boy in the story?”
- “What do you think will happen next?”
- “He looks really frightened. I think he must have heard the tiger roaring.”
- “She’s happy the queen left because she won’t bother her anymore.”
- “That reminds me of the time we went to John’s farm and saw his chickens.”

By using language for thinking and learning when you have conversations with your child, you will expand his thinking and help him understand ideas beyond the here-and-now. Not only will he have more to talk about, but he’ll also gain a deeper understanding of his world and learn more from his daily experiences.



The ideas above about encouraging language for thinking and learning come from several Hanen resources. Our newest one for parents, *I'm Ready!™ How to Prepare Your Child for Reading Success*, has many ideas about encouraging this type of talk using books, as a way to promote children’s early literacy skills. [Learn more](#)

## References

1. Uccelli, P., Demir-Lira, Ö. E., Rowe, M. L., Levine, S. and Goldin-Meadow, S. (2018), Children's Early Decontextualized Talk Predicts Academic Language Proficiency in Midadolescence. *Child Development*. E-publication ahead of print: doi:10.1111/cdev.13034.
2. Greenberg, J. & Weitzman, E. (2014). *I'm Ready!™ How to Prepare Your Child for Reading Success*. Toronto, Ontario: Hanen Early Language Program.

## 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](http://www.hanen.org).*

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