



How to Talk to Children Who Are Learning to Talk

By Lauren Lowry

Hanen Certified SLP and Clinical Staff Writer

When we speak to children who are learning to talk, and especially children with delayed language development, it's natural to simplify things by using simple, short sentences. For example, instead of saying, "Do you want one of these cookies I bought at the grocery store today?", a parent may say, "Do you want a cookie?" This is helpful and makes language easier for children to understand and process.

But there is some debate about whether to use proper grammar in these shorter sentences. The question is whether to use speech that is *telegraphic* or that is *grammatical* with children with delayed language development:

- **Telegraphic speech includes the important words in a sentence that carry most of the meaning but removes the grammatical words and endings** (such as adding *-ing* to the end of verbs, or smaller words like *the, is* or *a*). Examples of telegraphic speech include: *Mommy go out; blocks down; open door; in box.*
- **Grammatical speech includes all of the small grammatical words and endings.** Examples include: *Mommy's going out; the blocks fell down; open the door; on the table.* Being grammatical doesn't mean you need to use a complete sentence -- you can use a portion of a sentence as long as it has proper grammar (*e.g., in the box*).

Some intervention programs have encouraged the use of telegraphic speech, arguing that it's easier for children to imitate and learn language when they just hear the "key" words.

However, recent research is telling a different story; researchers studying children with delayed language have discovered that:

- **short, grammatical sentences are not more difficult for children to understand than telegraphic speech** [2]. In fact, many experts feel that children benefit from hearing proper grammar as it gives them clues about what words mean and how they are used in sentences. For example, words such as “a”, “the”, “this” and “my” tend to come before nouns, but other grammatical words and endings (such as the *-ing* and *-ed* endings) give clues about verbs.
- **children imitate short grammatical sentences as easily as they imitate telegraphic speech** [3]
- **telegraphic speech may hinder language learning for children with autism spectrum disorder** [4] – one study found that parents who used more telegraphic speech when their children were 3 ½ years old had children who used fewer different words one year later [4].

Children benefit from hearing proper grammar because it gives them clues about what words mean and how they are used.

These results suggest that, for children with delayed language, short, grammatical sentences are **not** more difficult to understand than telegraphic speech and they likely offer an advantage for language learning.

How to simplify what you say

Using short grammatical sentences or portions of sentences that are grammatical is the ideal way to speak to a child who is learning to talk. A good rule of thumb when trying to figure out if something you are saying is grammatical is to think about ***whether it’s something you would say To an adult***. For example, if an adult asked you where to put the clothes to be donated, you might respond with “in the box” even though it’s not a full sentence, but you wouldn’t say “in box”. You also wouldn’t say these types of these things to an adult: “want open?”, “put in”, or “Michael go school”.

Think about whether it’s something you would say to an adult.

A good way to simplify your language and make new words stand out is to use the **4 S's**:

Say less – Keep your sentences short but grammatical. For example, instead of saying “You have to put your shoes on because it’s time to go pick up Ava from school”, you could say “Let’s put your shoes on” or “Put your shoes on.”

Stress – Make key words stand out by stressing them with your voice. You can make your voice animated or say key words slightly louder than the other words in the sentence. For example, as you are heading out the door on a cold, snowy day, you might say “Ooh, it’s **cold** outside”, saying the word “cold” slightly louder than the other words.

Go Slow – Speaking slightly slower than you would when speaking to an adult allows your child to hear your words and process what you are saying. Don’t speak too slowly, though, and lose the natural rhythm of your speech – just slightly slower than your regular pace.

Show – Showing your child what key words mean is another way to simplify your language. You can point to what you’re talking about, use a gesture or action, or hold up an object or picture. For example, if you are asking your child if he wants a cracker, you could hold up a cracker while you say the word “cracker”. Or, if you are letting your child know that it’s time to put her shoes on, you could point to her shoes.

Also, don’t forget to **repeat** new language. Children need to hear new words and sentences many times and in several different situations before they understand and remember them, and eventually try to use them themselves.

The way you speak to your child can make a big difference for his or her language learning. When you simplify your speech by using short, grammatical sentences and the 4 S’s, you provide as many opportunities as possible for your child to hear and learn new words and how they are used within short sentences.

More practical suggestions about building the communication and language skills of young children with language delay in everyday activities can be found in the Hanen guidebook [*It Takes Two to Talk®: A Practical Guide for Parents of Young Children with Language Delays*](#) [4].

References

1. Sandbank, M. & Yoder, P. (2016). The Association Between Parental Mean Length of Utterance and Language Outcomes in Children With Disabilities: A Correlational Meta-Analysis. *American Journal of Speech Language Pathology*, 25(2):240-51.
2. Brendin-Oja, S. L. & Fey, M. E. (2014). Children's responses to telegraphic and grammatically complete prompts to imitate. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 23, 15-26.
3. Venker, C. E., Bolt, D. M., Meyer, A., Sindberg, H., Ellis Weismer, S., & Tager-Flusberg, H. (2015). Parent telegraphic speech use and spoken language in preschoolers with ASD. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 58, 1733-1746.
4. Weitzman, E. (2017). *It Takes Two to Talk®: A Practical Guide for Parents of Young Children with Language Delays*. Hanen Early Language Program.