

Using Curiosity to Encourage Communication Skills

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If you watch a young child for a few minutes, you'll see his or her natural curiosity at work. Infants are always picking up objects, examining them, and using their senses to explore and learn about them. As they get older, children express their curiosity by asking questions – hundreds of questions – about things that they want to know more about.

Curiosity isn't just being interested in something; it involves wanting to know more about something when we are surprised by it or when it doesn't fit with what we already know [1, 2]. We are naturally curious when things are new or unexpected and we want to know more about these situations. Experts who study curiosity have found that it motivates us to learn new things, and that this can even be seen in infants. If we encourage young children's curiosity, we may be able to provide special opportunities for language learning.

Children learn more when they are curious

Researchers have discovered some interesting things about how curiosity affects children's learning:

- infants pay more attention to and look longer at things that are unexpected. For example, they look longer at a ball when it appears as if it is passing right through a wall (unexpected) than when the ball is stopped by a wall (expected) [3].
- when infants watch a toy behave in a surprising way, they learn new information more easily than when they watch a toy behave in an expected way [3]

Curiosity helps children notice unexpected things that might be worth exploring and learning more about.

- older children (5- to 7-year-olds) learn new words more easily after watching an object do something surprising than they do when they've watched an object behave in an expected way [4]
- there's a middle ground when it comes to curiosity – children are attracted to learning about new things that are somewhat unexpected. However, they pay less attention to things that are either completely expected or too unexpected [4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9]. For example, a study found that 7- to 9-year-old children were able to remember more details from a story if it had one or two unexpected elements than from stories that didn't have any unexpected events or too many unexpected elements [9].
- kindergarten children who are more curious tend to have better reading and math abilities [10]

Curiosity acts as a sort of surprise detector, helping children notice unexpected things that might be worth exploring and learning more about [11]. This sets children up to be motivated

learners. As a result, researchers recommend that we look for ways to encourage children's curiosity to promote their early learning [10]. Encouraging children's curiosity can also help with early language learning.

Using curiosity for language learning

Children learn language best when they have interactions with their caregivers about things that interest them during everyday activities and routines. We can use some of these everyday situations to spark children's curiosity and create opportunities for them to communicate.

Here are some ideas about how to do this:

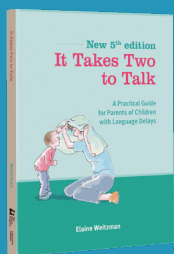
- » **Follow your child's lead** – Following your child's lead means observing your child closely and listening to what he says to figure out what's caught his interest. When you follow your child's lead, you will see his natural curiosity in action, and you will know what he wants to learn about and talk about.
- » **Create opportunities for curiosity and communication** – you can do something unexpected during a familiar activity to create the element of surprise, which will encourage your child to communicate with you:
 - **Put things in surprising places** – Try putting something unusual in your child's sock drawer or toy box. As your child pulls out a pair of socks, she might be surprised to find her favourite teddy bear and want to tell you about it.
 - **Let mistakes happen on purpose** – “Accidentally” give your child a fork instead of a spoon with his soup or put your child's shoe on the wrong foot. Your child will likely react to your silly mistakes!

- **Do the routine in a slightly different way** – Give your child his pants before giving him his underwear or change the order of the bedtime routine (read a book before brushing teeth). Your child is likely to notice that something is different and comment on it!
- **Add something new or different** – If your child is building a train track, hand him a puzzle piece instead of a piece of track and wait for his reaction. He might say something like “No, Mommy,” “That’s not right,” or “I need more tracks.”
- **Point out new things** – if something unusual or new happens during the day, point it out to your child and make a comment about it. If you buy a new kind of cereal, show your child the box, let him explore it, take some out and let him taste it, and talk about whether he likes it. Or, if you are out for a walk and see an unusual bird, point it out and say something about it. Then see what your child says or does next.

Unexpected events trigger children’s curiosity and encourage them to send a message about what they noticed. The more children send messages, the more opportunities they have to practice communicating.

- » **Respond to your child’s curiosity** – When your child sends you a message about something unexpected, respond by saying something that relates to what he communicated. If your child is surprised when you give him a fork instead of a spoon and points to the cutlery drawer, you can say “Oh! You need a spoon”. If your child says “No, Mommy!” after you put her shoe on the wrong foot, you can say, “Oops! I put your shoe on the wrong foot!”. Because your child is paying close attention during these moments, she will notice the words you use, especially if they match what she is thinking.
- » **Change it up, but not too much!** – Researchers have found that children are curious about things that are unexpected, but not too unexpected. Try to add just one new or unexpected thing during a very well-known activity. Otherwise, you may confuse or frustrate your child.
- » **Ask thought-provoking questions** – Verbal children express their curiosity by asking questions. One way to spark their curiosity and encourage them to ask questions is to ask thought-provoking questions yourself. Asking questions that begin with “I wonder what would happen if...”, “I wonder why...”, “What if we...”, or “Tell me about...” gives verbal children examples of ways to ask questions to satisfy their curiosity.

Creating situations which encourage curiosity has many benefits for your child. Research shows that children learn more and remember what they learn better when they are curious.



For more practical strategies to support language learning during everyday activities and conversations, take a look at our guidebook, ***It Takes Two to Talk® – A Practical Guide for Parents of Children with Language Delays.***

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