



Does Telling Children to Say Words Build Their Vocabulary?

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Have you ever tried to help your child learn a word by telling him to say it? For example, telling your child to “Say mama!” or “Say juice!” It can be fun to hear your child repeat a word after you, but keep in mind that repeating a word doesn’t necessarily mean that your child understands it or will be able to use it on his own. It just means he’s learned how to copy you.

To really learn a new word, the first step is to understand it. Once your child fully grasps the meaning of a word, he will be able to use it on his own in a variety of situations.

So what are the best ways to help your child understand new words and build his vocabulary? Here are five Hanen tips that can help:

5 tips to help your child learn new words

Children learn language during the everyday interactions they have with their caregivers. By trying some of these tips as you play and interact with your child, you will help him understand what words mean and how they are used to communicate during everyday conversations.

- **Consider your child’s interests** – Children’s first words are usually about things that catch their attention during everyday life. If you follow your child’s lead by watching him closely, you will discover what he’s interested in. Then, if you pause and wait, he may try to communicate about whatever has caught his attention. This will give you an opportunity to use words about his interests. If he gives you a toy and wants to play, use words to describe that activity. If he points to the cupboard and wants a snack, it’s a perfect time to use words related to food and eating. Your child will be more likely to

learn the words that come up during these activities because he's motivated and interested.

- **Show your child what words mean** – To help build your child's understanding, you can show him what words mean by using actions and gestures. You can point to something as you say the word (e.g. point to a bird in the sky as you say "Look at the bird!"), act out what the word means (e.g. pretend to shiver as you talk about how "cold" it is), or hold up an object as you say its name (e.g. hold up your child's coat as you say, "It's time to put your coat on").
- **Repeat key words** – Children need to hear words several times in different situations before they really understand what they mean. Try to repeat words that are familiar to your child during everyday activities and routines. For example, you might use the word "cold" when you are talking about going outside, when you are serving ice cream, or when you are adjusting the water temperature to wash your child's hands. Using the same word in different situations gives your child more information about what the word means.
- **Use a variety of words** – Besides the names of common objects, people, and places in their life (nouns), children need to learn a variety of words such as action words (verbs like "go", "jump" and "eat"), words that describe things ("soft" and "big"), and location words ("up" and "down"). Using different kinds of words as you play and interact with your child will help build his vocabulary.
- **Use short, grammatical sentences** – It's tempting to use single words with children to simplify things, but children learn a lot about what words mean and how to use them when they hear them in short, grammatical sentences. So, if you want your child to learn about the word "big", it's better to say, "That's a big dog" than to look at the dog and say "big".
- **Respond to your child's attempts to communicate, even if these attempts aren't perfect** – As children are learning about words, they sometimes attempt to say a word but don't pronounce it correctly, or they might use an action or gesture instead of the word. When you notice your child attempt to communicate with you, respond as if he said the word. This shows him you are listening and that you understand what he is trying to tell you. It also encourages him to keep trying to communicate with you.

Learning to say new words doesn't happen overnight. It takes time for children to build their understanding enough that they can say a word and use it in the right situation. By using the tips above, you will give your child's vocabulary a kickstart, and pave the way to new words.

For more ideas about how to build your child's early vocabulary, have our [Parent Tips](#) emailed right to your inbox!

Many of these ideas are based on information from the [It Takes Two to Talk](#) guidebook for parents, which offers practical suggestions and strategies for caregivers to encourage the communication skills of young children with delayed language development.