

Why Letting Your Child Lead May Not Be So Easy

Children's communication styles

Children have different styles of communicating. A child's communication style can either make it easier or harder for her to interact with others. A child's communication style depends largely on her ability to do two things:

- **start** interactions with others
- **respond** when others start an interaction with her

Communication style also has a lot to do with a child's personality, as well as how comfortable she feels in a situation. It can also be influenced by her language difficulties, as well as her physical health, side effects of medications and overall development.

There are four communication styles: Sociable, Reluctant, Passive and Own Agenda.

Sociable Communication Style: A child with a Sociable communication style often starts interactions with others and responds easily when others interact with her. A child who has language difficulties and a Sociable communication style may not use words, or may be hard to understand, but this doesn't stop her from trying to interact with others. She finds it easy to take the lead in an interaction.



Alicia has a Sociable communication style and easily starts an interaction with her mother.

Reluctant Communication Style:

A child with a Reluctant communication style does not start an interaction very often. When she does, her message may not be obvious, and you may even miss the fact that she has communicated with you. A child with a Reluctant communication style finds it easier to *respond* to others than to start an interaction. She may need time to “warm up” before she’ll respond, especially if she doesn’t know a person well. Having communication difficulties may affect her confidence in her ability to interact with others.



Amanda has a Reluctant communication style. She responds to her dad when they play together, but she seldom starts an interaction.



It can be hard to connect with a child like Katie, who has a Passive communication style.

Passive Communication

Style: A child with a Passive communication style rarely starts an interaction *or* responds. It’s hard to connect with her because she appears to show little interest in people or objects. Children who are unwell or who take medications that make them tired may have a more Passive style than they would otherwise. Some children with developmental delays also have a Passive communication style.

Own Agenda Communication Style: A child with an Own Agenda communication style seems to tune others out and tends to play on her own. She seldom starts interactions with others. When she does, it's usually because she needs something. It can be hard to get a response from a child with this kind of communication style because she seems to be in her own world. She may play with one toy for long periods of time, or she may move quickly from one activity to the next, but she doesn't seem able to share her play with others.



Cameron has an Own Agenda communication style. Dad isn't sure how to get an interaction going with him because Cameron seems to prefer to play alone.

Take a moment to think about which communication style best describes your child *most of the time*. Children who have Passive, Reluctant or Own Agenda communication styles need extra support to get involved in an interaction. But even children with a Sociable communication style will benefit from your efforts to make interactions more successful, interesting and fun.

Parents' roles

Every day, as you and your child interact, you play a variety of roles. Many things influence these roles, such as your personality, your ideas about being a parent, your child's communication difficulties, her communication style and the challenges of a busy life. At one time or another, every parent takes on all of the roles described on the following pages, but playing certain roles too often can get in the way of your child's language learning.

Let's look at some typical parents' roles.

The Director Role: Parents direct their children's lives every day. They plan what their children will eat, what they will wear and when they will go to bed. But sometimes parents play the role of Director too often. They do most of the talking, telling their children what to do and how to do it. They may not realize that over-directing can get in the way of their child's learning. Children learn best when they lead interactions.



Robert wants to find the page with the monster, but his dad is playing the Director role, insisting that they read the book page by page.

What colour is the fire truck? Can you count the wheels?



When Brian's mom takes on the role of Tester, she's too busy asking questions to OWL and notice what has really captured his interest.

The Tester Role: Parents want their children to learn new skills. If a child isn't developing language as expected, her parents may think they need to work even harder to help her learn. So they take on the role of Tester, asking lots of questions to see what she's learned. But testing a child doesn't help her learn. A child learns best when she is having fun and her parents are tuned in to her interests.

The Entertainer Role: A parent in the Entertainer role is lots of fun and does whatever it takes to keep a child amused. The Entertainer tends to take the lead, doing most of the talking and playing. The problem is that the child doesn't have much opportunity to interact and be part of the fun. To learn language, children need to be actively involved in the interaction.

Look at Mr Elephant. He's going to eat some leaves from a big tree.



Scott enjoys watching his dad be the Entertainer but he doesn't have an opportunity to get involved.

The Helper Role: When a child has a hard time learning to communicate, her parents naturally want to make things easier for her. They tend to play the role of the Helper, doing everything for her and not expecting much communication. Parents of children with special needs may feel an even stronger need to play this role. But when parents are too quick to help, they may not find out how much their child can communicate and what really interests her.

Uh-oh, do you want Mommy to get it for you?



When Sofia drops her toy, her mother becomes the Helper, rushing in to help before Sofia has a chance to do anything herself.

It's six o'clock. We'd better hurry.



The Mover Role: Parents of young children are busy people, and their days are full of things to do. To stay on schedule, parents have to keep things moving fast. However, parents who play the Mover role too often may miss the chance to connect with their child and talk about things that interest her.

Megan's mom is in the Mover role because she is running late. She doesn't notice that Megan is trying to tell her something.

The Watcher Role: Sometimes parents would like to interact with their child but aren't sure how to join in. They may end up just watching her play or commenting on what she's doing from a distance. This is especially true if the child doesn't seem interested in interacting. Children do need some time to explore and learn on their own. But to learn language, they need to interact with their parents.

In his role as Watcher, Cameron's dad does a play-by-play commentary from the sidelines.

You've got a mouse in your truck. That's a nice mouse. He wants some cheese.



The Tuned-In Parent

When it comes to helping your child interact and learn language, the most important role for you to play is the role of the **Tuned-In Parent** – tuned in to your child’s interests, needs and abilities. Tuned-In Parents give their children opportunities to start an interaction, and then they respond immediately with interest.

You can’t be a Tuned-In Parent all the time. But to play the Tuned-In Parent role more often, think about whether you are talking too much, asking too many questions, helping your child too often or rushing more than you need to.

When Robert’s dad thought about it, he realized there was no reason to be the Director and to insist on reading every page in the book. So, he followed Robert’s lead and let him turn to his favourite page with the picture of a monster.



Dad realizes that Robert is making a monster sound and follows Robert’s lead. Now that he’s the Tuned-In Parent, the fun begins.