

Get the Conversation Going with **Finger Painting**



Fun activities like finger painting are one of the best activities for building your child's language skills. When you join your child in an activity they like and can get really involved in, you have lots of opportunities for enjoyable back-and-forth conversations. Research shows that it's within these kinds of natural, fun conversations that children learn language best.

Here are some Hanen strategies to make the most of finger painting to get conversations going. You can use these tips no matter what stage of communication your child is at, whether they communicate with sounds or gestures only or they speak in sentences.

Step 1 – Gather the supplies

Here are some ideas for what you can use:

- » Several pieces of blank paper. You might try using a thick paper like Bristol board or cardstock so the paint won't soak through.
- » Plastic bowls of water and tissue for cleaning fingers
- » Washable paints and paint trays

Step 2 – Get Face-to-Face

Try to sit face to face with your child. This makes it easier for you to see their facial expressions and to pick up any nonverbal communication. It also makes it easier for your child to look you in the eyes, which helps you connect and share the moment.

Step 3 – OWL™ (Observe, Wait and Listen)

This step happens before the conversation starts. It's important not to skip it because it's what sets the stage for the best conversations. *OWL* stands for:

Observe – Watch your child silently and pay close attention to what they say or do. This will tell you what they're interested in. You might observe which colours they're choosing, how many fingers they dip at once, and whether they like to dab a little paint or wipe a lot along the paper.

If your child isn't sure how to start, you could demonstrate by dipping your finger in paint and dabbing the paper once and saying, "look, I painted with my finger!" Then stop and observe, without speaking, to give your child time to come up with his own ideas.

Wait – Sit quietly and avoid telling or showing your child what they could do with the paints. This gives your child an opportunity to explore and experiment, which will show you what they are most interested in doing.

Listen – Pay attention to what your child says, without interrupting. This lets your child know that you are really present and focused on them, and that what they have to communicate is important. It's best to avoid questions like, "What are you painting?" or "What are you going to do?" They might not know yet!

Step 4 – Respond right away with interest

With the information you gather from Observing, Waiting and Listening, you can take the next step by responding with interest. When your child sends a message of any kind – a look, a smile, a sound, a gesture or a word – it's important to respond right away. This builds your child's confidence and encourages them to respond back to you. For example:

- » If your child dips each finger in a different paint colour and then shows you their hand, you can say, "Wow, you have a different colour on every finger!"
- » If your child giggles while excitedly dabbing paint on the paper, you can say, "Wow, you're making so many purple spots!"

Tip!

Make sure you have your own paper in front of you so that when you're ready to join in, you won't have to use your child's paper.

Step 5 – Join in the play!

Using your own piece of paper, you can now:

Copy what your child is doing – If your child makes a handprint on their paper, try doing the same thing on yours! This is likely to get your child's attention and they'll probably smile or laugh, or, if they speak in sentences, they might comment on it or ask you what you are doing. This is a good beginning to a conversation!

Playfully build on what your child says or does – For example, if your child likes to pretend and says they are painting clouds, you could say, "Hmm, I hope there's no rain inside those clouds!" Then wait to see what your child says or does. Or if your child accidentally mixes two colours together, you could say, "Look, you mixed yellow and blue and it made green! I wonder what would happen if we mixed yellow with red?"

By taking the time to figure out what your child is interested in, then responding with interest and joining in the play, you set the stage for wonderful interactions with your child. The more back-and-forth turns your child takes in an interaction, the more opportunities they'll have to hear language that helps them learn about things they are interested in. In addition, they have more opportunities to practice having conversations and using their language skills. So, as long as your child is interested, keep the conversation going!

Find more tips and strategies for making the most of conversations at www.hanen.org