



Helping Toddlers Expand Language Skills

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communicate and validate those attempts so that kids do more of it. We all respond better to more positive phrasing.

- **Contingent responses:** Respond immediately to all attempts to communicate, including words and gestures. This is a big one. It shows kids how important communication is and gives you the opportunity to model more sophisticated language skills.
- **Balance turn taking:** Give kids the space to exercise their communication skills by making sure they get a turn. Turns don't need to be talking, either. A turn could be your child handing you a toy or making eye contact. Maybe your daughter will look at you because she needs help opening a box. You can say, "You need help opening the box!" Then you can wait for her to hand you the box — that's her taking another turn. Turn taking can be hard for parents because we're used to taking charge of situations, but it is important to give kids the opportunity to use the skills they are developing.
- **Label things:** Even when kids aren't ready to use words yet, you can prepare them by labeling things in their environment. During bubble baths keep referring to the bubbles; during snack time you can label the apple juice.
- **Limit "testing":** If you know that your son knows which sound a pig makes, don't keep asking him. Testing him during playtime instead of just playing with him can be stressful. Instead you could say, "I wonder where the pig is going?" It still invites him to respond, but it doesn't put him on the spot.
- **Labeled praise:** Instead of just saying "good job," put a label on that praise. If your child isn't yet using words, (or even if they are) you could say, "Good job putting all the blocks back," because it reinforces their good behavior even more. For a child who is using some words to communicate, you could say, "Nice job telling me that you want apple juice," or "Nice job saying more juice please." This will help create positive feelings around communication and motivate them to continue to try and add new words.

This article was last reviewed or updated on February 8, 2022.



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