

Building Language Skills in Toddlers

Toddlers, or children from ages one to three-years-old, communicate in many ways. They make sounds, say words, use short sentences, or point to tell you what they need or want. Recognizing and encouraging all attempts toddlers make to communicate helps in building language skills. When you respond, toddlers realize that what they've done is important and are likely to do it again!



Teaching your toddler new words

New words help toddlers talk about the things they see and do. Building their vocabulary can be achieved by talking about many kinds of words, including the names of things (e.g., spider, car), actions (e.g., painting, running), feelings (e.g., sad, happy) and words that describe things (e.g. soft, hot).

Here are some ways you can draw attention to new words and help toddlers build their vocabulary:

- Use daily routines to introduce new words, ideas, feelings, and concepts. Routines such as dressing and mealtime are natural times to talk with your toddler. Use these routines to emphasize and repeat words that may be new for them. Talk with them about what's happening in the moment.
- Talk slower and sound out the new word
- Talk about what you're doing as you're doing it. Hearing words combined with actions makes the new words easier to learn (e.g., "I'm mixing the cookie dough. The cookie dough is very sticky. Let's put them in the oven. The oven is very hot. I'll be careful not to touch it.")

- Talk about what the toddler is doing. This will help them learn words that describe activities or things that interest them (e.g., “That’s a nice red truck. It’s driving really fast. It’s going up the ramp and around the corner.”)
- Toddlers say many words, but not always clearly. You can help them speak clearly by repeating back the words they say, using correct pronunciation. Exaggerate the missing or mispronounced sound. Listening to these correct models will gradually help the toddler to improve their speech.
- Use new words many times throughout the day. To learn new words, most children need to hear the words spoken many times before they start to say them (e.g., “Look, the wheels on the truck roll.” “Roll the ball to Daddy.” “I’m going to roll the cookie dough.” “Let’s roll a snowball.”)
- Use short, simple sentences to help them learn to say a new word (e.g., “Let’s buy pie.”)
- Let them experience new things. Go on field trips to the zoo, museum, grocery store, and playground. Use educational videos, television, songs, and books to help them hear new words (e.g., “Put the sand in the bucket.”)
- Link new words to things and experiences the toddler already knows (e.g., “The dinosaur is very big. It’s huge! Remember the huge dinosaurs we saw in Drumheller? We also saw dinosaurs in the movie The Land Before Time.”)



Get down to their level

Kneel, bend down, sit on small chairs, or stretch out on the floor when talking to a toddler. Do whatever works to get down to their level to make it easier to imitate the actions and words of toddlers. It also lets them know that you are interested in what they’re doing or saying. Make sure you’re able to look into each other’s eyes when you’re speaking to one another.

Make it fun!

Toddlers learn language by listening and copying what they hear around them. If you keep your sentences short, and talk that way often, toddlers will have an easier time learning to talk in sentences.

Use the rhythm and repetition of songs, finger plays, and books to build language skills. Rhythm and repetition of songs and finger plays help your toddler to learn and remember words and sentences. Choose songs and rhymes with a theme they like (e.g., animals, dinosaurs, trains). Visit your local library to find books and DVDs to give you new ideas.

Make books fun and accessible. Have them within your toddler’s reach so they can choose a book to

bring to you. Good books for toddlers have bright, realistic, and fun pictures, with only a few words on each page. Reading books together can be a fun time with your child and a great way to introduce new words and sentences. Your library has a wide variety of books suitable for toddlers.

Act early!

From the moment they are born to five years of age is an important time for the development of speech, language, and hearing in children. Strong speech, language, and hearing skills are important for later learning and school success. Acting on concerns early is important.

Where to go get help? For more information about how speech-language pathologists and audiologists can help, contact:

- Your doctor, public health nurse, or other health provider
- Your local health centre
- Visit the [Talk Box](#) - A parent guide to creating language rich environments

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