

TIPS

Teaching Important Parenting Strategies:

Raising a Child With Limited Verbal Skills

**Megan Ahlers, MS, and
Colleen Hannigan Zillich, MS CCC-SLP**

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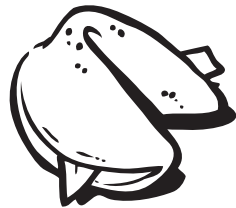
Introduction

We are delighted to be able to share our thoughts and experiences with you. We have had the privilege of working with many wonderful families throughout our careers. As a result of the relationships developed with children and their parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters, and other caregivers, we have learned that one theme is constant: We all want and wish for our children to reach their full potential as productive citizens. We would like to thank our colleagues and families for their mentoring and collaboration over the years.

In this resource, you will find practical tips to make life easier for you and your child. Specifically, we will discuss strategies to support communication and positive behaviors during playtime, your daily routines, in the community, and with relatives. These ideas and strategies were generated from personal experiences as well as professional trainings and coursework.

In developing a meaningful and easy-to-read resource, we have used the questions that parents have asked us over the years as springboards for providing quick and easy-to-implement information and suggestions. Whether you read this book in its entirety or in sections, we hope that it will offer you and your family practical tips for raising your child.

Megan and Colleen



CHAPTER 1

Functional Communication Skills

(The Power of Communication)

In this chapter, we review questions you may have about your child's communication and comprehension skills. Our responses will target ways to help you improve your child's speech and language development. We will also offer ideas for promoting communication through everyday activities and during holidays and the seasons of the year.



What are ways to help my child communicate more effectively?

As a parent, you often know what your child wants even before he asks for it. Try to hold off on meeting your child's needs immediately. Embrace this moment as a time to teach your child how to request his basic wants and needs.

Example: Your child is standing in front of the refrigerator. You know that he just ate some pretzels; you also know that he loves milk and that he knows there is milk in the refrigerator. You assume your child is thirsty and would like some milk to drink. Yesterday you responded by just opening the door to the refrigerator and pouring him a cup of milk. But today ... no more!

Begin by laying the communication groundwork. Place a picture of a cup or a carton of milk on the refrigerator at a reachable level for your child. You can take a photo using your camera or find



pictures in the coupon section of the newspaper, in grocery store ads at the store, online through a search engine (e.g., www.images.google.com), or take the label off of the package and use that. Place the pictures on the refrigerator using magnets or magnetic tape, which may be purchased at a craft store.

In addition to providing objects and pictures, it is beneficial to show your child the hand signal (sign language) for milk. You may access an online sign language dictionary at www.signing-savvy.com. Your local library is another good resource for sign language books. Try not to get overwhelmed with the task of learning sign language. Start by learning one or two signs and use them daily.

With these communication pieces in place, the next time your child goes to the refrigerator to ask for milk, you can now say, sign and point to the picture of milk. To give him more opportunities to practice, pour just a small amount of milk in a cup, then have him hand you the picture in exchange for the milk. Keep this exchange going and expand upon it by offering additional choices.



How do I encourage my child to ask for things?

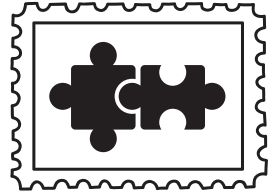
To begin, look at how your child is currently communicating. Is he taking your hand to objects? Is she bringing you items? Is he reaching for you? Is he crying or grunting as he reaches for things or people he wants? Is she standing next to items she wants?

Let's begin to take your child to the next level of communicating by focusing on his requesting skills. Make a list of items your child loves or wants. These are the items you will begin teaching your child to request.

Children request items, actions, comfort, and help in different ways. The following are examples of ways in which children request and ideas for how you can respond.

Physically moving a person or object:

- *Taking your hand/Trying to move your body:* Follow the child's lead to find out what she wants. Once you have determined her request, describe for her what she is requesting. For example, if she leads you to the pantry, say "Eat ... I want to eat." You can also sign the word "eat." Or you can place pictures of foods or food packaging on the outside of the pantry so she can make a more specific request.
- *Handing you an object:* Model for the child what you think he is requesting. For example, if he hands you a puzzle piece that he cannot fit in independently, say "help" as you help him place the puzzle in the board. Keeping language short and specific will help him understand.
- *The child turning your face towards him:* This is often a request for attention or for you to look at the child. You can model words and signs such as "Mom," "Look," or "Watch me."



Gesturing:

- *Pointing/reaching:* Label what your child is pointing to/reaching for. This attaches language to his actions. For example, if he is reaching his hands up for you to pick him up, say and sign, "up."
- *Looking at an object/person:* Your child may request by looking at a desired object or person. If he enjoys playing games such as peek-a-boo or singing songs, he may look at you to request to play the game or sign a song again. You can say "again" and then repeat the song/game .

Vocalizing:

- *Making sounds, vocal pitch changes, or cries:* A child may make different sounds to indicate different emotions or requests. Label these feelings for your child. For example, if he makes a high-pitched sound to indicate he is excited, say, "You're happy." If your child uses a specific sound when frustrated or mad, label these emotions for him, too.

- *Saying words or approximations to words:* When a child learns to talk or use sign language, the first words usually won't sound or look perfect. Any close approximation should be acknowledged. For example, if your child says "b" instead of "ball," play ball and model the full word he was attempting to say. If your child is learning to sign "drink" (sign is made by making a cup shape with your hand and bringing it to your mouth) and he puts his hand near his mouth, count that as a request for drink. Your child's skills will develop as he repeats these words and signs.



TIP ...

Find a container, preferably clear, that will hold empty wrappers, boxes, cans, bottles, and/or other packaging of your child's favorite foods and/or items. We refer to this container as a "request box." Multiple request boxes can be made to support your child throughout the day, such as a mealtime request box, snack time request box, and play request box.



Request box for play.



Request box for drink choices.

Chapter 1 – Functional Communication Skills



Request box for snack choices.

Requesting by using the items in a request box is a more concrete method of supporting the child's communication system than merely using words. Transitioning from the empty containers to pictures can be done by pairing a picture with the requested item. As your child develops an understanding of what the picture represents, you may reduce the use of the request box with the objects.



Snack choices made from the packaging of snack choices.



Pictures of drinks cut out and taped on the refrigerator.



Snack photographs cut out into the shape of the item and taped on to a dry erase board.



TIP ...

If your child's favorite activities are bouncing, swinging, and/or spinning, you can offer associated objects or pictures that represent the activities. For example, use a dollhouse swing to represent swinging or take a picture of your child swinging. Seek out other visual representations that you can use to support your child. These may come in the format of corporate logos, photos of individual family members, Internet images, small-item representation (dollhouse furniture), menus, brochures, and/or clean food wrappers from fast-food favorites. These are all ways to foster requesting skills through use of visual representation.



How do I help my child make choices?

Start by showing your child the actual items when giving choices. For example, say, "Do you want to play with the car or the puzzle?" while showing him the corresponding items. Also, give your child choices of favorite items and less preferred items. This will ensure that he is choosing what he really wants as opposed to just taking either one of the options because he likes both items.

Remember you are trying to teach your child how to make choices. You can encourage your child to make choices throughout his day. For example, when getting out his breakfast, show him two options and give him the item he reaches towards. When reading books, show him two different books and ask him to pick one. He may indicate his choice by looking at one book, tapping it, or reaching for the book.