

L is for Language

Creating a Language-Rich Environment

Children develop language-related skills long before they say their first words. Communication, or sending and receiving messages, between an infant and caregiver occurs through an infant's use of eye contact, facial expressions, gestures, and sounds. Around their first birthday, young children often begin using simple words to communicate. From birth, children's everyday interactions influence brain development and how they will share ideas with others. Research shows there are many ways to create language-rich environments through **relationships**, **repetition**, and **routines**.

Language-Building Strategies

Here are four strategies for nourishing young children's communication and language during everyday interactions.

Strategy 1. Join children in routines and activities.

Joining young children as they play or participate in daily routines, like meals or chores, provides repeated opportunities to interact with others. These interactions build the foundation for communication and language.

Strategy 2. Talk about what children are doing or what they see you doing.

Watch what interests a child and talk about it with him or her. Label things that the child is interacting with (e.g., "That's your ball.") or doing (e.g., "You are standing."). Children also learn words by listening to others talk. The more words you use to describe your and the child's experiences, the more opportunities the child will have to hear new words and practice using them. Encourage everyone who interacts with the child to provide a language-rich environment.

Strategy 3. Respond to children's communication.

Children communicate using eye contact, gestures, facial expressions, sounds, and words. Responding to children when they communicate encourages them to take turns while talking. This sometimes is referred to as serve and return interactions.

Strategy 4. Read and sing songs.

Reading books and singing songs teach children about the rhythm and sounds of language. Reading and singing also help children to learn how to sequence words and increases their vocabulary.

What We are Doing

The Anita Zucker Center and our collaborators work to support families and practitioners to implement everyday strategies to help children build communication and language skills.

Language-Building Strategies for Children 4 to 5 Years Old

Strategy 1. Join children in routines and activities.

- Draw a picture together. Use encouraging words while asking the child questions about the picture as she draws.
- Make a snack together. Let the child choose what to make and what he wants to be “in charge” of as you make the snack (e.g., spreading jelly on the bread). Ask the child what comes next (e.g., putting the bread slices together).

Strategy 2. Talk about what children are doing or what they see you doing.

- Use words such as “first” and “then” when talking about daily routines to help the child learn and talk about the sequence of events. After he is familiar with the steps in the routine, encourage him to describe the steps to you.
- Talk about your and the child’s feelings. For example, “I am frustrated because I can’t find my shoe.”

Strategy 3. Respond to children’s communication.

- Answer the child’s “why” questions. When you do not have the answer, find it together (e.g., ask someone else or look it up).
- Help the child label and talk about feelings. For example, if she has difficulty joining friends at a birthday party, say, “You look like you might be a little nervous because there are a lot of people we don’t know here. What would help you feel better?”

Strategy 4. Read and sing songs.

- Read the same book more than once. Once you have read a book a few times, ask the child to describe parts of the story or experiences she has had that are similar to the story. For example, “What do you think happens next? You’re right, she goes to visit Grandma. Have you ever gone on a trip to visit someone?”
- Make up songs together. Take turns copying each other’s words and dance moves.

These illustrated strategies follow the milestones identified in the CDC guidelines for children from birth to five years old. For more information, visit www.cdc.gov/ActEarly.

