

## Talk Together: Closing the word gap in the early years **Recommended**

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This article offers great advice for monitoring and developing young children's initial communication and language skills.



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### **Language in the Early Years**

As young children observe, watch and play with others, they begin to absorb the different elements of what is required to use language. They learn how to use language socially and develop an awareness of their listeners, thinking about what and how they are saying things. They learn the sounds associated with the language and begin to use them correctly. Once children begin to understand what others are saying, they start to learn how to put their own thoughts into words and sentences.

### **Language Development**

*"Over 50% of children start school without essential communication skills."*

[ican.org.uk](http://ican.org.uk)

Children's learning of language develops at different rates, but it is in the first three years of a child's life that the foundations of language skills are formed. Research has shown that there is a link between poor language development in children at a very young age and their academic and future successes. It is social interactions with the adults in these early years that is key.

## **Language Difference or Language Delay**

In the UK, a language difference may be identified when a child is learning English as an additional language to the language they use at home. In their home language, development milestones are being reached as expected but differences in their acquisition of English may be apparent. With both rich and varied language stimulation in their first language at home and English in their setting, these language differences will disappear. It is when children are not reaching the expected language milestones in their first language that there may be a need to seek advice. Through regular verbal interactions, signs of language delay can be identified earlier and the necessary support put into place.

## **Stages of Language Acquisition**

Although language learning varies at different rates from child to child, there are key milestones that give indications of language development in their very early years. In the Early Years Outcomes curriculum, Communication and Language is assessed in English and children are expected to be secure in this area by the time they leave nursery. Where English is not a child's first language, it is important for practitioners to establish the strength of the child's first language.

By tracking the child's stage, practitioners can best cater for the provision and plan appropriately. Keeping a record and updating it throughout the year will show progression over time.

- **Stage 1: Silent Period:** The length of time this can last for can vary. Children are listening and absorbing what is going on around them, what they see and what they hear being said. It is at this stage where they are developing the confidence they need to feel secure enough to begin to use their new language. Later on they will begin to imitate words that they hear.
- **Stage 2: Early Production:** Children are beginning to use one or two words. Their bank of receptive and expressive vocabulary is continuing to develop, and they are using short snippets of language that they have memorised.
- **Stage 3: Speech Emergence:** At this stage, children are beginning to communicate with simple phrases and sentences. They are beginning to ask simple questions and initiate short conversations with their friends. Children show an understanding of simple stories and a willingness to join in with repetitive refrains.
- **Stage 4: Intermediate fluency:** At this stage, children are beginning to use more complex sentences when speaking and are able to share their thoughts and opinions.

It is important for early years practitioners to understand that all new learners of English progress through the same stages to acquire language. However, the length of time each child spends at a particular stage may vary.

## **Every Child's a Talker**

[Every Child's a Talker Monitoring tool](#) (from the West Sussex County Council website) enables practitioners to assess the developmental level of children's speech, language and communication for all children. Practitioners can assess all children in their development in English, and, in liaison with parents or bilingual support, assess the child's development in their first language. The developmental stage can then be compared to the child's chronological age.

Through observation in everyday practices and practical activities, the four communication strands that are focused on are:

- Listening and Attention
- Understanding
- Speaking
- Social Communication

### **Assessing Understanding**

Knowles and Massidlover (1978) devised the concept of 'Information Carrying Words' and it is this concept upon which programmes, such as the Derbyshire Language Scheme (that many settings use), are based upon.

### **One-On-One Communication and Language Activities**

#### **One Information Carrying Word**

**You will need:** Easily recognisable objects such as an apple, shoe, ball, banana etc.

**What to do:** Hold out your hand and ask the child to give you a specific object. For example, 'Give me the apple.' The child would have to understand the word 'apple' to be able to complete the instruction. This can be repeated with a variety of objects to assess their understanding.

#### **Two Information Carrying Words**

**You will need:** An apple, orange, plate and cup.

**What to do:** Without giving any visual clues (such as looking at the object or gestures like holding out hands), ask the child to 'put the orange on the plate'. The child would have to understand two words ('orange' and 'plate') to follow the instruction and will have to choose from a variety of objects, such as an apple or orange and plate or cup.

#### **Three Information Carrying Words**

**You will need:** A big orange and small orange, a big apple and small apple

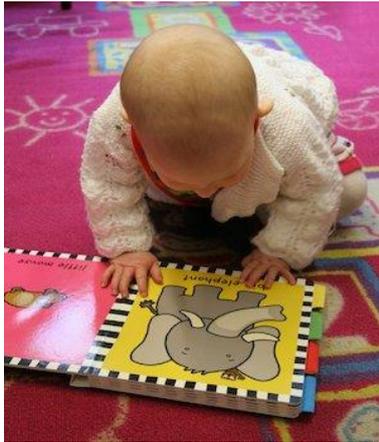
**What to do:** Ask the child to 'make the small orange roll'. The child would not necessarily have to understand the words 'make' and 'the' but will have to understand 'orange', 'small' and 'roll'. This can be varied with other types of objects.

#### **Four Information Carrying Words**

**You will need:** a bear, a doll and different sized red, blue and yellow forks and spoons.

**What to do:** Ask the child to give you the bear and the big red spoon. With a choice of bear or doll and red, blue and yellow spoons and forks, which are big and small, the child would have to understand 'bear', 'big', 'red' and 'spoon'.

## The Nursery Environment



Encouraging a love of reading through set storytelling sessions and good literary continuous provision in the Early Years setting is important. Stories will inspire young imaginations and well-loved tales, such as 'The Gingerbread Man' and 'The Three Billy Goats Gruff', that use repetitive language are particularly useful. A child who has been exposed to a range of books from a young age is more likely to have a wider vocabulary than a child who has not been exposed to literary language.

The magic of language comes alive through [rhymes and action songs](#) and they are a fun way to help children with their language acquisition. Young children can learn to pick up rhythms and songs very quickly.

Remember to value all words used even if not correct. Repeat what the child has said correctly, showing the child that you have heard them, rather than pointing out the error.

Constantly model and extend language by commenting sensitively on what the child is doing in their play and what is happening.

Value and celebrate all languages in your setting. Invite parents to get involved, for example, telling a story in their home language. See [this article](#) for more ideas on telling stories in other languages.

## Small Group Communication and Language Activities

### Lucky Ducky

**You will need:** [Duck masks activity sheet](#), five objects (eg shoe, sock, hat, coat, bag).

**What to do:** Share the action song 'Five Little Ducks'. After singing the song, model being the lost duck, and invite the children to join you in moving like a duck, quacking like a duck and flapping like a duck. Have the five objects ready, then, acting as the baby duck, take a breath and dive down to the bottom of the pond to find and pick up one of the objects. Pretend to swim up to the surface again, quacking as you go. Invite the children to name the object found. Next, name one of the other objects and invite each child to take turns to be the baby duck.

### Copy Me Now

**What to do:** Children learn language by imitating others. Invite the children to link simple instructions to song by playing games like 'Copy Me' to teach different vocabulary such as body parts, positional language or action words.

Sing the song:

*Copy, Copy, Copy me now,*

*I do this.....*

*And you show me how.*

Children will copy the adult doing the action. The adult then pauses and invites the group to do the action, supporting this by reinforcing the vocabulary. For example, Jump, Hop, Touch your nose, Touch your toes. Extend the activity by inviting children to think of their own movements.

### **Blow Me Down With A Feather**

**You will need:** Feathers, pieces of tissue paper, and few balloons, straws for each of the children.

Name objects with the children and then invite them to anticipate the instruction 'Ready, steady, go'. Invite the children to blow the feathers with their straw from one point to another, then support the relevant vocabulary. Repeat with other objects.

<https://resource-bank.scholastic.co.uk/content/Talk-Together-Closing-the-word-gap-in-the-early-years-36666> [accessed 06.01.21]