



The Meadows Center
FOR PREVENTING EDUCATIONAL RISK
THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN
COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

10 KEYS

10 Key Policies and Practices for Supporting Language Development

—with strong evidence of effectiveness from high-quality research—

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1 Notice and respond to the child's communication.

A first step to building language is to **notice** how a child is communicating. This can be done by positioning yourself face to face (i.e., sitting or standing at eye level) with the child. Communication takes different forms, including eye contact, gestures, words, sounds, changes in vocal affect, changes in body positioning, and changes in facial expression.

A second step is to **respond** to the child when face to face. The child should see your gestures, facial expressions, etc., to pair what they are hearing to what they are seeing. Change body and face position depending on where the child sits or stands in an activity or in their daily routine (e.g., snack, play time, dressing). Move with them as they move to stay face to face!

- *During mealtimes, a caregiver sits directly across the table from a child to be face to face. If that is not an option, the caregiver sits diagonally across or at a right angle from the child. When communicating with the child, the caregiver adjusts her head and upper body to face the child, especially to respond to or initiate conversation.*
- *While giving instructions in a classroom, a teacher stands in front of a child at their eye level.*
- *While playing on the floor or at the table, a teacher positions himself at a child's eye level in front of the child. This way, it is easier to notice when and how the child communicates.*
- *When pushing a child on a swing, a caregiver stands in front of the child instead of behind and communicates while the child swings.*

Hancock et al., 2016; Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2019; Kaiser & Hampton, 2017

2 Wait for the child to communicate.



Wait after each idea or instruction you communicate to a child. This pause indicates that it is the child's turn in the conversation and allows the child time to process the idea. Although a teacher or caregiver may want a child to respond quickly, repeating or moving on too soon can cause the child to receive multiple ideas at once and feel too overwhelmed to respond. Instead, try counting to five silently before repeating or saying an additional instruction.

- *Before transitioning to a new play activity, a caregiver says, "Blocks or cars?" while holding up both. The caregiver counts silently to five before giving further instruction.*
- *A preschool teacher instructs a small group of children to sit on the floor while showing how she wants them to sit. The teacher silently counts to five. Several children sit right away, and the others sit while the teacher is still counting to herself.*
- *A caregiver gives four pieces of cereal to a child in a highchair. The child finishes the four pieces. The caregiver looks at the child while holding more pieces of cereal and counts to five silently. The child asks for more cereal.*
- *A caregiver points out an airplane in the sky and says, "I see an airplane!" The caregiver continues pointing and counts silently to five. The child looks up after four seconds and says, "Ohhh." The caregiver responds with rich language: "The plane is flying fast!"*

Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2019; Kaiser & Hampton, 2017

3 Model language at or near the child's communication level.

Model language by narrating what a child is looking at, smelling, touching, listening to, or experiencing. Give words to actions and items that are in the child's environment. Think about how to describe objects and items in different ways. When modeling language, use the same number of words or one more word than the child typically uses. For example, if the child isn't speaking yet, use one-word models; if the child is using only one word at a time, try using two-word phrases. Emphasize important words like adjectives and verbs by saying them more loudly or exaggerating their articulation.



- A caregiver is blowing bubbles with a child who communicates with sounds but not yet with words. While the child pops and catches bubbles, the caregiver says, “Pop” or “Bubbles” or “Wet.”
- A child who typically communicates using one word at a time is eating goldfish. The babysitter says, “Orange goldfish” as the child inspects the goldfish. The babysitter says, “More goldfish” as the child grabs goldfish from the dish. This modeling shows the child how to combine words.
- A preschool teacher and a child who typically communicates using two to three words at a time are playing with a toy car. As the child pushes the car, the teacher says, “The car says vroom.” As the child drives the car around a racetrack, the teacher says, “I’m driving fast.”
- A caregiver and a child who communicates using three to four words at a time are playing in a sand pit. The caregiver says, “You’re making a big castle” while the child builds a sandcastle. The caregiver says, “The sand feels soft” as the child squishes her hands in the sand.

Hancock et al., 2016; Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2019; Kaiser & Hampton, 2017; Schreibman et al., 2015

4 Create **balance** by taking turns.

Taking turns is part of keeping **balance** in an interaction. Individuals in an interaction should have equal opportunities to communicate.

During Conversation: Leave space for a child to respond after making a comment or asking a question. Wait and allow the child to initiate communication. Balance is not always achieved with words; it can also include gestures and facial expressions. If you make a comment about something and the child acknowledges by nodding and smiling, the child has taken their turn. It is also important to use varying types of statements and gestures in addition to comments, such as questions, responses, nods, and points.



- A caregiver and a child who typically communicates using one word at a time are playing with Play-Doh. The child shows the caregiver the shape the child created, and the caregiver says, “Purple circle.” The caregiver shows the child the flowers that the caregiver made. The caregiver waits quietly. When the child looks at the flowers and makes eye contact, the caregiver says, “Two flowers.” The child extends an arm to hold a flower and says, “Flower.” The caregiver then asks, “Pink or green one?” to clarify which flower. The child says, “Pink.” The child and caregiver are having a balanced interaction by communicating and completing actions after the other.
- A teacher and a child who communicates using two words at a time are working on a floor puzzle. The child connects a puzzle piece and says, “Moon puzzle.” The teacher nods and says, “You made the moon!” The child connects pieces of the Earth. The teacher points to it and says, “There’s planet Earth.” The teacher looks at the child and waits for a response. The child points to Earth and hands the teacher two star puzzle pieces. The teacher puts one puzzle piece on and waits to put on the other. The child looks at

the teacher and says, “Make puzzle.” The teacher says, “I’ll make the star puzzle” and connects the star. This interaction is balanced because the child and teacher have space to take turns equally. The teacher also responds to the child’s actions and elicits communication by waiting for the child to take their turn.

During Play: Taking turns while playing supports children’s knowledge of turn-taking as they start to have conversations with others. After taking a turn with a toy, wait for the child to communicate for a turn. The child can learn and practice back-and-forth interactions through taking turns during play. It is helpful to share the same one object (e.g., one car, one doll, one ball) or set of objects with the child. If the child has difficulty with sharing objects, make your turn short and return the object to the child quickly. Slowly, increase the time of your turn. You can also praise the child for waiting appropriately for their turn (e.g., “I like that you’re waiting for ___.”). Say, “My turn” to cue when it is your turn or extend your hand to request a toy.



- A child and a caregiver are playing a board game. The child rolls the dice and moves the game piece. The caregiver then says, “My turn” and holds out his hand, cuing that it is his turn. The child gives the caregiver the dice. The caregiver rolls the dice and takes his turn. The caregiver quickly hands the dice back to the child. Later, the caregiver practices a time delay by holding the dice in his hand after taking a turn and waiting for the child to request a turn.
- A caregiver and a child are playing with a toy fishing rod and several toy fish at bath time. After the child catches a fish, the caregiver extends her hand and says, “My turn.” The child hands the rod to the caregiver. The caregiver notices that the child is struggling when waiting for the fishing rod, so the caregiver quickly takes her turn and hands the fishing rod back to the child. As they continue to take turns, the caregiver slowly increases the time of her turns with the fishing rod.
- A child is building a block tower. Each time the child puts a block on the tower, the caregiver adds a block and says, “Build a tower!” Then, the caregiver waits for the child to add another block or perhaps knock down the tower. This pace of play may be slower, but it allows for clear language models to be mapped onto the play and provides an opportunity for the caregiver and child to take balanced turns.

Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2019; Kaiser & Hampton, 2017



5 Imitate words and actions with the child during play.

Imitation is an important skill for children to enhance vocabulary and language learning. First, notice what a child is interested in and imitate what the child is saying and doing with those objects. This will gain the child's attention and show that you are interested in how the child wants to play. Then, show a new or different action that the child would be interested in imitating. Try to make that new action fun by adding sound effects and silly movements. This will gain the child's attention and motivate the child to imitate the new actions and words. It is best to have your own set of the same or similar materials as the child. For example, if the child is playing with kitchen toys, you should have similar kitchen toys to imitate play. This allows the child to imitate without having to wait to take a turn with the objects.

- *A caregiver notices that a child likes putting body parts in different areas of a Potato Head toy. The caregiver imitates the child by putting the same body parts into her own Potato Head. After imitating the child for a few minutes, the caregiver places a pair of Potato Head shoes on the Potato Head's nose, saying "Honk honk." The child giggles and grabs a pair of shoes to place on his Potato Head. The caregiver laughs and models, "Silly shoes on his nose!"*
- *A caregiver and a child are playing with slime. As the child stretches her slime, the caregiver stretches his slime. As the child squishes the slime with both hands, the caregiver does the same. The caregiver then shows a new action—pretending to look through the stretched-out slime and saying, "I see you." The child looks at the caregiver and also attempts to look through the slime.*
- *A child and a teacher are doing an art activity at a table. The child is drawing shapes with a blue marker on construction paper. The teacher also has construction paper and a marker and is imitating the child. After the teacher imitates a few drawings, they begin taking turns drawing shapes. At first, the teacher draws the same shape that the child draws. Then, the teacher draws something that the child hasn't drawn—for example, a heart with polka dots while singing, "Dot dot dot." The child sees the drawing and then draws another shape with polka dots on it. The teacher comments to the child, "Cool polka dots!"*
- *A caregiver and a child are playing with pool noodles at the neighborhood pool. The child is shaking the pool noodle. The caregiver imitates the child by shaking his own pool noodle. The caregiver continues to imitate the child's actions. Then, when it is the caregiver's turn, he taps the pool noodle in the water and says, "Splash." The child imitates the caregiver by tapping her pool noodle in the water.*

Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2019; Schreibman et al., 2015

6 Recast grammar and speech errors.

It is typical for young children to speak with nongrammatical sentences and mix up verb tenses. **Recast** grammar and speech errors by repeating a child—but in a grammatically correct way. Recasting with correct grammar aids the child’s language skills because they hear a correct model. The child does not need to repeat the grammatically correct phrase. Recasting in this way allows the child to hear the correct way of speaking while still acknowledging the child’s words and phrases.



- A child who typically communicates using two words at a time and a caregiver are playing with a toy racket and ball. The child says, “Ball give” while extending his hand to the caregiver. The caregiver nods her head and says, “**Give the ball**” and passes the ball to the child. The caregiver does not have the child repeat the correct phrase.
- While eating a snack together, a child tells a caregiver, “I want cookie more.” The caregiver says, “Sure, you **want more** cookies” and hands the child two small cookies. The caregiver emphasizes the words “want” and “more” but does not require the child to repeat the correct statement.
- After a teacher passes out a snack to students, one child says, “I eated it all up.” The teacher looks at the child and smiles, saying, “You **ate** it. That was fast!”
- A caregiver and a child are playing hide and seek in the back yard. The child points to the back porch light and says, “White on.” The caregiver nods and says, “**Light** on!”

Hancock et al., 2016; Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2019; Kaiser & Hampton, 2017

7 Expand language, ideas, and play.

Expand language by adding to what a child has already said. Expanding language, including grammar, is important because the child hears variations of vocabulary and language. This is a powerful tool, as it builds on language the child has already used and models language specific to their interest and communication. Expand the child’s language according to their current communication level. Follow a similar rule as when modeling language—use one more word than the child typically uses to communicate.

- A child holds up a blue block to show a caregiver and says, “Blue.” The caregiver expands the child’s language by saying, “A blue block.”
- A child says, “Squish” while pushing his hands into kinetic sand. A caregiver also puts her hands in the sand and expands the child’s language by saying, “Squish the sand.”

Expand ideas by adding a new concept or idea to what a child has communicated. Expanding ideas helps continue the conversation and allows the child to think of new ideas to communicate.

- A child says, “I took my dog for a walk!” Then, a caregiver says, “Taking a dog for a walk helps keep it healthy and strong!”
- A child says, “I like cats!” Then, a teacher says, “I like cats, too. I have a brown cat at my house.”
- A child says, “Mickey Mouse’s friend is Goofy.” Then, a caregiver says, “Mickey also has a dog, named Pluto!”
- A child says, “The sun is a star” while pointing to the sun. Then, a caregiver says, “The sun is the closest star to Earth!”

Expand play by adding to a child’s play scenario. This tool involves modeling various play actions and imaginative play ideas in relation to the child’s current play activities.

- A caregiver and a child are playing with a doll house and toy animals. The child grabs a doll and has it run inside the house when a lion outside roars. The caregiver expands play by having the doll lock the door and hide under the table.
- A teacher and a child are playing pretend kitchen on the playground. The child pretends to make pancakes and serve them on a plate. The teacher does the same. Then, the teacher pretends to pour syrup on her pancakes.

Hancock et al., 2016; Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2019; Kaiser & Hampton, 2017



8 Use communication temptations.

Communication temptations are explicit scenarios that encourage a child to communicate. It is important for these opportunities to be natural and motivating for the child, so they want and need to communicate. This can be achieved by tying the communication temptations to the activity that the child is currently doing and enjoying. Communication temptations can include giving a few items to the child so they request more, using fill-in-the-blank statements (e.g., “A cow goes ____.”), and putting items the child enjoys where the child cannot access them on their own and must gain your attention to request the item.

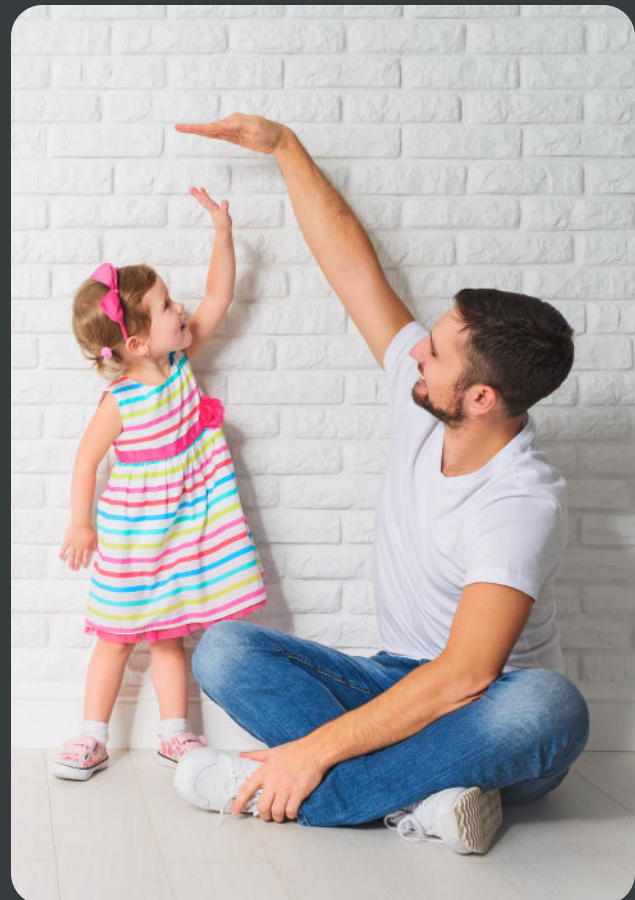
- *A caregiver places a few blueberries in a child’s bowl at snack time. When the child eats the blueberries, the caregiver holds out more blueberries in his hand. The caregiver looks at the child, smiles, and says, “You ate blueberries.” The child points to the blueberries in the caregiver’s hand and says, “More blueberries.”*
- *A child and a caregiver are looking at a book about animals. As the child looks at the animals and at the caregiver, the caregiver begins to label the animals on the page and make animal sounds. The child smiles. The caregiver says, “Next is the ____” and looks at the child, before labeling the animal. The child says, “Doggy.”*
- *A teacher and a child are playing with a racetrack and racecars. The teacher takes out one racecar and leaves the rest closed inside a clear box. The teacher encourages the child to race the cars with her. The child looks at the box and at the teacher and says, “Open the box.” The teacher used a clear box to show what was inside and a hard lid so that the child would need to request help opening the box.*

Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2019; Schreibman et al., 2015

9 Use teaching questions.

Depending on a child’s level of language development, specific types of **questions** can increase language and vocabulary skills. However, avoid “test” questions (e.g., “What color is that?”; “How many are those?”; “What animal is it?”) as much as possible during social interactions because they do little to increase the child’s language skills. A test question ends a conversation because the child will respond with only one word and your only response will be to indicate whether the child’s response is correct. Instead, ask questions that will aid with language learning, including choice questions (e.g., “Do you want markers or paint?”) and open-ended questions (e.g., “What do you want?”; “What happened?”).

- *A caregiver asks a child, “Do you want to eat cheese or a strawberry first?” while holding up both options.*
- *While at the playground, a teacher asks a child, “Do you want to climb on the rock wall or jungle gym?”*



- When a child looks around at toy train pieces, a caregiver says, “What are you looking for?” instead of “Are you looking for something?”
- While a caregiver and child stack blocks, the blocks fall to the ground. The caregiver shrugs, gestures with her arms open, and says, “Uh oh. What happened?” The child responds with, “I knocked it down!”

Hancock et al., 2016; Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2019



10 Use positive behavior support and behavior-specific praise.

Positive behavior support includes responding with **praise** and reinforcement to a child’s desirable behaviors. Praise can take various forms (e.g., high fives, words, hugs, toys, items, smiles, nods) that align with individual preferences and/or culture. It is important to notice how children respond to different forms of praise and adjust. Behavior-specific praise should be given by (a) stating the desirable behavior (e.g., action, statement, task) and (b) using a positive praise statement or gesture or giving tangible items such as toys to the child. By stating the specific behavior, the child can connect those actions or words with the positive reinforcement they receive. Instead of saying “Good job,” say a specific action that was “good” (e.g., “I liked that you clapped!”).

A teacher and a child are cleaning up toys together in the classroom. The child picks up the trucks and puts them in the bin. The teacher says, “Trucks go in the bin. Yay!” and gives the child a high-five. The teacher first specified what the child was doing and then praised the child in the way the child prefers.

Hancock et al., 2016; Ingersoll & Dvortcsak, 2019; Royer et al., 2019

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