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III #20 Speech

Easy ways to
build on the
communication
skills your child
learns at school

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photographs by Carrie Prohett

As Mrs. Pat settles into the circle of children sitting on the carpet, she greets them with a cheery “Good morning!” The class brightly responds in unison, and Daniel sits up tall, ready to kick off the “hello routine” they recently learned on the first day of kindergarten. “Good morning, Maria,” says Daniel, as he turns to face his classmate and extends his hand. Daniel and Maria smile and giggle as they shake hands, until Maria gently breaks away to greet her neighbor Natasha, sitting on her other side.

In a few short years, Daniel and his classmates have mastered many of the complexities of communication: making eye contact, reading facial expressions, taking turns, and using oral language. Your child’s communicative and social skills go hand in hand. The

The Power of Language

ability to use language to express needs, ideas, and feelings is a critical step toward being able to understand and participate in the social world around him. Through language, your child is able to make friends, enjoy playing and being with peers, learn from others, discuss ideas, and gain ever more knowledge about the world in which he lives.

A child’s language-development journey begins in infancy: As adults respond to a baby’s babbles, coos, and cries, children find that they can communicate their pleasure, sadness, comfort, or discomfort. As children grow, they acquire increasingly sophisticated commu-

nication skills through new experiences and frequent interaction with parents, caregivers, teachers, and peers.

Creating a Language-Rich Environment

Verbal communication skills are indeed linked to the language richness of a child's home and school. Your child's early school experiences are particularly powerful in shaping her language skills, because it's the

who must do the thinking and problem solving. But they can't problem solve alone; they need to work together as a group. To do so means they will have to communicate with one another.

As the new school year begins, it's a good time to look at your child's home environment and think about the ways you can support and build on the communication skills he is learning at school. There are several important things you



first time communication takes place within a group. So while it's true that the more language your child hears, the more language she will learn, real communication takes place within the context of doing things with others.

When you enter an early childhood classroom, you'll notice that it's planned to give children common experiences. The art, music, and literacy areas contain materials that motivate children to express their ideas and feelings in many ways, without having to use language directly. Raw materials—cardboard boxes, wood planks, and blocks, for example—inspire children to work together, make plans, negotiate, and solve problems. Because no one tells them what to do with the materials, the children become the decision makers—the ones

can do to create an atmosphere in which your child can express himself effectively and creatively:

- Make sure your child feels safe and knows his ideas and ways of communicating are accepted, valued, and respected.
- Be sure he has someone to speak with and a variety of things to talk about.
- Model and teach your child the conventions of language.

Valuing Your Child's Words

Although children learn to communicate naturally, they must feel safe and secure before they can express themselves openly. Little ones often need extra assurance that what they have to say will be acknowledged and valued.

The most important thing you can do to build your child's sense of language security is to accept his own way of communicating. Children do not learn language well by being corrected or criticized. For example, Brooke and her mother are walking through the park. "Look, look," says Brooke, as a rabbit scurries away from them. "I seen a bunny! I seen a bunny!" "No," says Brooke's mother. "Say, you *saw* a bunny." "Yes," says Brooke, "I seen a bunny." Again, Brooke's mother corrects her: "Brooke, listen to me. You did not *seen* a bunny. You *saw* a bunny." Brooke, with the excitement of seeing a rabbit gone, sighs and, almost in a whisper, says, "bunny."

Brooke did not learn the difference between *saw* and *seen*, but she did learn that her way of talking was not acceptable. Children learn grammar by hearing it used correctly. To foster Brooke's willingness to communicate, her mother could have focused on Brooke's exciting news, saying, "Oh, you saw a bunny! Do you think we frightened it away?"

Repeating what your child has said, even when you change some of her words, is very reinforcing. Most children want to talk more when their parents ex-

pand on what they say. If Brooke's mother were to say, "Where did the bunny go?" she and Brooke could have a great conversation about rabbits—where they live and how bunnies might

feel when surprised by people walking toward them.

Taking Time to Stop and Listen

The demands of being a parent are never ending, but when you do make the time to stop and truly listen to your child, the benefits are priceless.

Claire runs to her mother after school with a painting that seems like a scribble of colors, saying, "Look, look! I made a pretty picture." Claire's mother takes a break from stacking dishes in the dishwasher to sit with Claire. Together, they

"Hello neighbor!"
Communication skills blossom in groups—at school.



"I'm so proud. You put your shoes on."

It's also important to think about what your child is saying to you. Toddlers use telegraphic language, in which they use one or two words to represent an entire sentence or thought. When your toddler says "up," it could mean, "please pick me up" or "the cat is up on the counter." If your child says, "Shoe off," you can reinforce her attempts at communication by filling in the missing words: "Oh, your shoe is coming off. Let me help you put it back on. You push your toes in, and I'll pull the heel up on your foot."

You can learn a lot by observing your child when he speaks to you. His facial expressions might reveal anger, fright, or happiness, to name a few emotions. His tone of voice also gives you clues to his feelings.

"Last night, the thunder woke me up," 5-year-old Brian tells his mother. Listening to his words, and recognizing the fear in Brian's face and voice,

his mother says, "You must have been frightened. What did you think when you heard the thunder?" Brian, relieved that his fears are recognized, opens up and shares his concerns about storms.

Similarly, 4-year-old Vanessa is having a day in which nothing seems to be going

Exchanging ideas can begin when two friends share a game or a book.

talk about Claire's painting. Her mother says, "I love how this yellow goes all through the painting and how the pink dances with joy." Claire, feeling valued and respected when her mother describes the painting to her, replies, "Yes, I made a painting about being very happy."

By taking the extra moment to have a deeper conversation, Claire's mother let her know that she and her work are valued. It can seem like magic: When you take the time to describe what your child

is doing, without judgment, it's like opening up a box of surprises. Here are a few common situations and suggested conversation starters:

- When your child scribbles, say, "Wow! Your whole arm is moving when you scribble like that."
- If your child is spilling and filling cups in the sandbox, say, "I see that you're having so much fun spilling the sand."
- When your child puts her shoes on, say,

How to Gauge Your Child's Language Development

AGE	Newborn to 12 Months	8 to 12 Months	1 and 2 Years	3 and 4 Years	5 and 6 Years
YOUR CHILD MAY...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ make eye contact and smile ■ babble and coo to communicate comfort or happiness ■ use arms and legs to express joy, excitement, or anger 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ understand directions, such as putting a hat on her head when told to do so; say her first words ■ repeat babbles, such as <i>da, da</i>, or <i>ma, ma</i> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ use sounds and utterances with adult intonation ■ begin to combine words ■ engage in telegraphic speech— one- or two-word combinations, such as "Daddy, come," "I fall," or "all gone" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ speak in nearly complete sentences ■ make up words and rhymes or repeat chants ■ tell a simple story, but not in sequence ■ ask many questions: why, how, and when 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ continue to expand vocabulary to about 5,000 to 8,000 words ■ be aware that a word can have more than one meaning ■ often misunderstand words and use them in a humorous way

right for her. At one point, she lashes out at her brother, calling him a "stupidhead" and grabbing his truck to hit him. Her mother intervenes and says, "You can't hit Alberto." Vanessa screams at her mother, "I hate you! I hate you! You're the stupidhead." Her mother calmly replies, "I understand you are angry, but you can't hurt Alberto."

By recognizing Vanessa's anger, her mother gives Vanessa a label for her feelings, sets limits on her behavior, and responds to her emotions. She acknowledges Vanessa's feelings, without humiliating her. In turn, Vanessa learns that even though her behavior is not acceptable, she is still accepted by her mother.

Here are a few common situations and suggested responses:

- When your child stumbles and screams even though he has barely scratched his knee, you can acknowledge his fear by saying, "Scratches do hurt. Why don't you come with me and pick out the bandage you want."

- If a child pouts and cries, "I never get to do what I want," you can recognize her feelings by saying, "You feel hurt because you can't do what you want now.

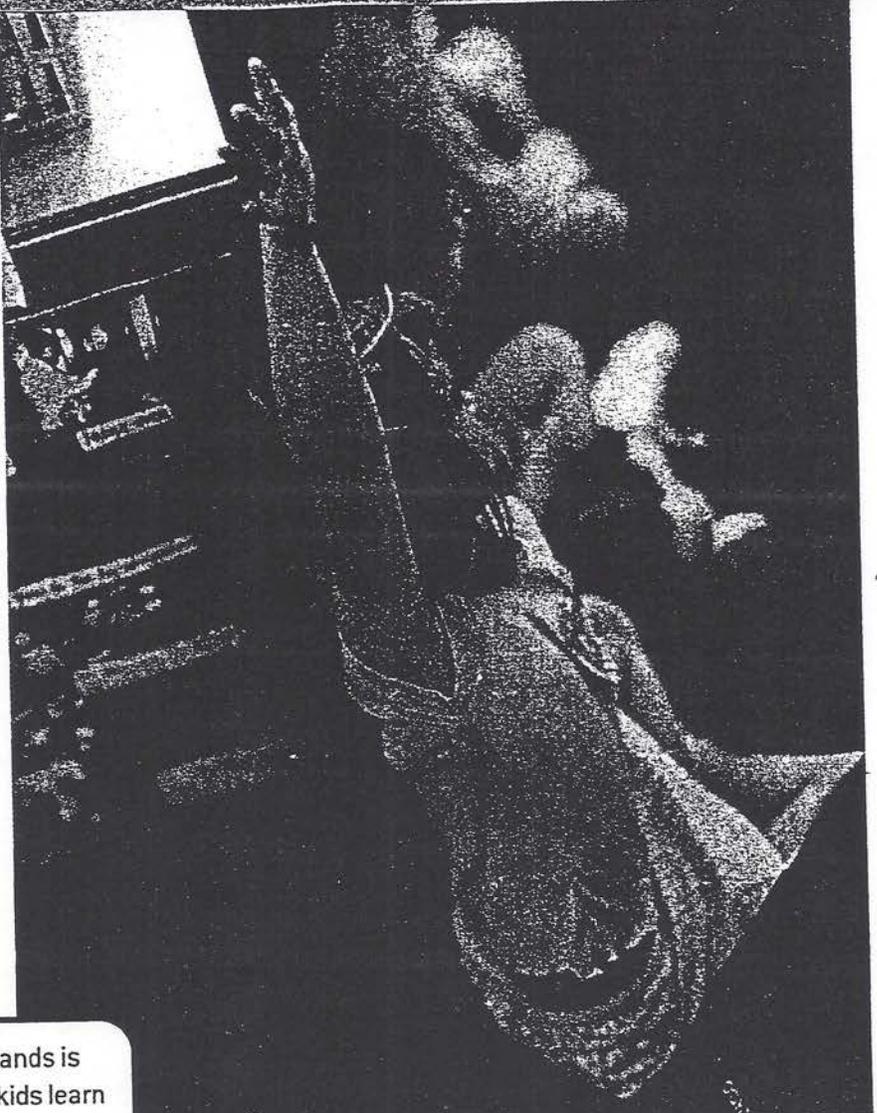
You'll be able to go back to the game after we eat dinner."

- To a child who says, "I hate my teacher! I hate my teacher!" you can say, "It seems like you are angry at your teacher. What happened today that makes you so angry?"

Learning the Conventions of Language

As discussed earlier, effective communication relies on a basic set of conventions. Children who easily make and keep friends know how to make eye contact with others when they are speaking and listening, understand the importance of taking turns in a conversation, and how to solve verbal conflicts. These children also know how to enter or leave a group without disrupting the play.

Raising hands is one way kids learn to take turns in conversation.



Children who are ignored by others and who have trouble communicating may not have mastered these necessary social skills. As a parent, you can help your child develop these skills by modeling the conventions of communication:

- ⊕ **Making eye contact.** Talk face-to-face with your child, and remind her why she should do it: "Look at her so she knows you are talking to her." Shy children might need extra help. Using puppets is a nonthreatening way to encourage your child to look at people when they speak to her, or you can invite her to talk to herself in the mirror.

- ⊕ **Taking turns in a conversation.** Children must learn how to interpret the signs a speaker gives—nonverbal cues, facial expressions, and changes in voice tone—when it's time for them to talk. Good timing is necessary. If you wait too long to

respond, someone else will jump in. If you don't wait long enough, you'll interrupt the speaker.

By the time your child is in preschool, she is learning to raise her hand when she wants to speak. You can reinforce this skill by arranging playdates with lots of peer interaction. You could ask your child to show her friend how to play a new game or how to build a track using Legos. If your child needs more help with turn taking, bring out the puppets again. Begin the conversation with your puppet. When your puppet is finished, say, "Now it's your puppet's turn to talk."

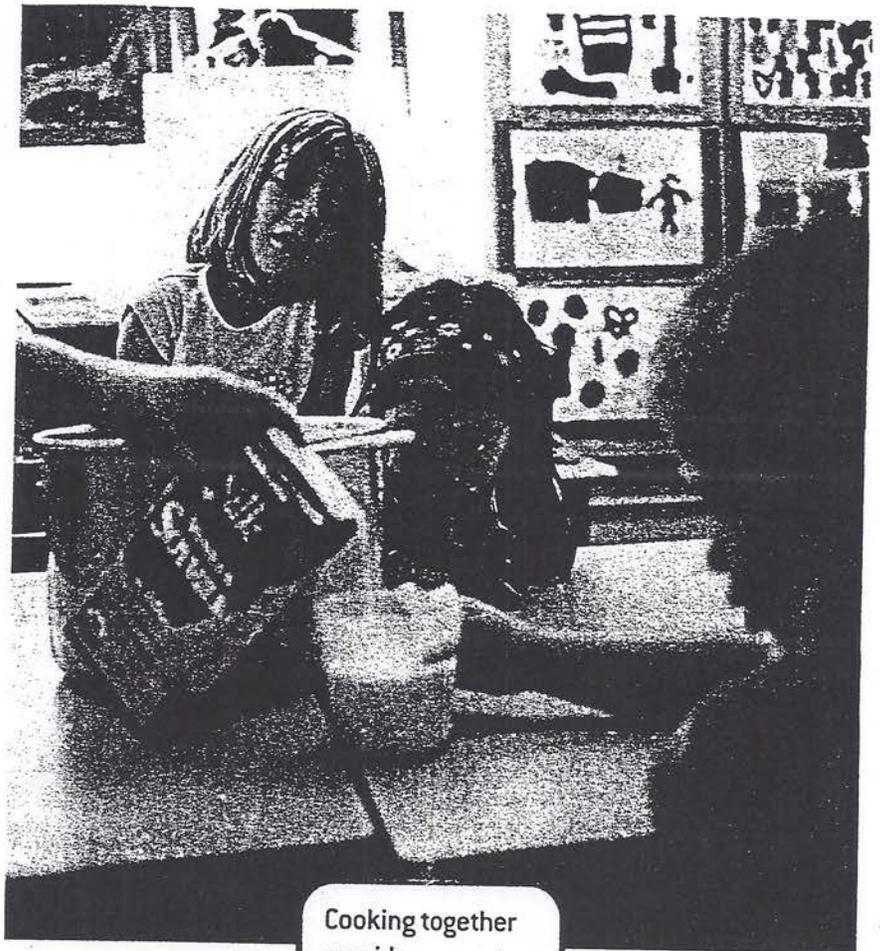
- ⊕ **Resolving conflicts.** At around 2 or 3 years of age, children learn to say no, which gives them a sense of control. Once they learn the power of *no*, they say it a lot. Conflicts over toys, what to play, how to play, and who can play may arise. By 4 or 5 years of age, children learn that if they

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Easy Ways to Build Your Child's Language Skills

Communication blossoms when you and your child do things with each other. When you play and work together, you have something in common to talk about. Try these language-rich activities:

- **Bake together.** Share the experience of measuring the ingredients, sifting and mixing, and then cleaning up. It's also a great opportunity to introduce related vocabulary: *tablespoon, half a cup, stirring, mixing, liquid, solid, dissolve, rise, bake.*
- **Take photos.** Share the pictures and talk about them so your child learns that you can communicate about things that happened in the past.
- **Read every day.** Ask your child to tell you which character she likes best and why, how she would feel if she were one of the characters, what she would do to solve the problem, and how the story makes her feel.
- **Tell stories about your own childhood.** Show pictures of yourself at your child's age, and talk about the stories you loved, the games you played, what you liked, and what you were afraid of.
- **Respond appropriately to your child's emotions.** If your child has a big smile on his face when leaving school, you might say, "You have a very happy smile today. Why?" Or, "You're frowning. What was sad about your day?"
- **Give your child verbal labels for her emotions:** "You must be angry, angry, angry!" "Your happiness shows on your face."
- **Play language games, such as I Spy; Red Light, Green Light; and Simon Says.**
- **Share poetry, songs, finger plays, and chants.** Ask your child's teacher for suggestions.



Cooking together provides a great opportunity to learn new words.

compromise ("I'll be the teacher first, then you can be the teacher"), they can

keep the play moving along and still have their own way. Children who can negotiate verbally with others can do so because they know how to consider another person's words, wants, and needs.

Acting Out

"Who's going to help me make Little Red Riding Hood's house?" asks Molly, as she runs to the pile of large cardboard boxes in the schoolyard. The children randomly start pushing the boxes together. They talk and argue, but eventually, with some plan in mind, begin building together. Throughout the morning and the next several days, the houses that are built change, taking on different forms and themes. Some belong to Red Riding Hood and the three little pigs, others belong to astronauts, and still others to fire trucks. Although the themes change, the children's

need to negotiate and problem solve does not.

You can help your child learn to compromise and negotiate at home by providing plenty of open-ended materials—blocks, boxes, clay, and art supplies—for use during playdates. You can also make yourself available to gently redirect play if a conflict arises. Start by offering a suggestion: "You can be the baby first, then Sally can be the baby." Or, "First it's your turn to ride the train, then it's Jack's turn."

Learning to listen and share ideas with others is the foundation on which your child's academic success is built. When you value your child's language skills, you are not only expanding his vocabulary and ability to communicate, you are also expanding his possibilities for a successful life.

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