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Talk with me: top tips from experts

Experts share top tips to boost your child's speech, language, and communication skills.

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Introduction

For many people, the 2021 festive break will have given them some well-needed quality time with their families, as the pandemic continues to affect our daily lives.

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For those with young families, that time may have been the best gift people could ever give their children - a gift that will benefit them their entire lives.

According to experts, even small increases in the time spent interacting with young children can give a huge boost to their speech, language, and communication skills.

Experts say that talking with little ones through play, reading, or just general chatter, helps their brains grow and develop. Even the **simplest steps** can help them develop as they learn to form new words, make connections between words, and put sentences together.

Those skills can also help children to express themselves, make friends more easily, and feel happier. It's also been proven that hearing more than one language from an early age can help children with their ability to learn later in life.

But, what are the tips and activities that parents and carers can use to help their children develop?

The Welsh Government's **Talk With Me** programme aims to share speech, language, and communication skills advice with parents and those caring for children aged between 0-5.

Here, speech and language therapists reveal some of the small things you can do to help boost a child's development and give them the very best start in life:

1. Does talking to my baby before they are born really help?

Yes! Research actually shows that babies can hear voices while they are still in the womb by about 24 weeks – so you don't have to wait until your baby is born before you begin talking with them.

In fact, talking about what you're doing, what you can see, even singing songs

and rhymes or reading a magazine out loud to your bump, can all help with their language development later on.

After they're born, they also respond more strongly to voices they've heard while in the womb.

2. I want to share story time with my child, but what can I do if I can't find a book in my own language?

Language doesn't need to be a barrier to enjoying story time together.

Don't feel under pressure to read what's written on the page. Going through a book and talking about the things you are both seeing in the language you're most comfortable using will help them recognise words. Your child will be listening to the words you're using and connecting them to the pictures they see.

And don't worry about your child learning one language at home and another at nursery or school – it's natural and beneficial. Children are wired to pick up more than one language from birth, and most of the world's population is bilingual or multilingual.

3. How can I get my child's attention when I want to talk with them?

There's a type of interaction called "contingent talk", which basically means talking to your child about the thing they're focusing on.

So, if your child is sitting on the floor and you can get down to their level too, join them! Simply sitting with them for a few minutes every day, making sure you're face-to-face, and getting involved with what they're up to, helps share their focus and can really boost their language development.

If a child is making a gesture towards a tree outside, you can say things like “that’s a big tree” or “that tree is blowing about”. Try not to worry about being silly or making funny sounds in public while talking about the things you’re seeing – they’ll thank you later on!

4. I can’t sing, but I know it helps my child - what should I do?

Many of us feel as though we don’t have great singing voices – but the fact is that to your child, you have the most beautiful voice in the world. Don’t be put off or embarrassed – you’re doing wonders for your child’s development.

Nursery rhymes with actions, like “Heads, shoulders, knees and toes” in English, or “Mi welais jac-y-do” in Welsh, are great songs to sing with your child because they come with actions that mean the words are more likely to stick in their memory.

5. How much time should I spend talking with my child?

There’s a lot of pressure on our time and a lot of us are very busy, but finding even just a few minutes a day to focus fully on your child is going to make a big difference to them.

Try making the most of the time where you’re doing something else. So, talk with your child while you’re sorting the washing out, perhaps naming types of items as you pick them up, or point out the pictures on their clothes.

Focus on trying to include small moments of interaction throughout the day.

6. What do I do if my child doesn’t like sitting

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down to read a book?

Sitting quietly and listening to a story isn't easy for every child, so a great way to get them to engage with reading time is to allow them to use books as toys. Letting them handle and play with a book in a way that is enjoyable for them can make a fun experience that they'll want to repeat.

Look at what your child is interested in, what they want to talk about, and the pictures they are pointing to. And if they want to read the same book over and over again, that is completely normal – the more they hear the same words, the more likely they are to understand and use them.

7. Should I be worried about the time my child spends in front of a screen?

Many children spend some time on screens during the day – the key is turning this into an opportunity for you to interact with each other.

Try looking at pictures together on screen and talk about what's happening in them, or watch programmes together and talk about their favourite characters and what's going on.

8. What can I do to help build up my child's vocabulary?

A great way of doing this is adding a word to what your child has already said, and so introducing them to new ones. If your child says "car", you might say "big car" or "fast car". If the child says "nanny" you might say "yes, we're going to nanny's". It's about expanding on what they have already said to help them build short phrases and sentences.

9. What can I do to help my child speak to other people or family members if they're shy?

Children love to interact with lots of different people, but it's normal for them to be shy around people they don't know or haven't seen much.

Reducing pressure on children to speak will help them build those communication skills in the long run.

You can encourage them to interact without pressurising them to talk, by doing things like greeting the other person yourself in a friendly and simple way. Try and resist the temptation to ask your child to talk. They'll be listening and watching you, and might just copy you anyway if they aren't feeling under pressure to do so.

“ It's so important that babies and young children develop speech, language and communication skills to give them a head start in life. The **simplest steps** can have a really positive effect on their lives.

“ Helping your child build up these skills means they have a much better chance of being able to speak clearly and confidently, which will then help them to learn in nursery and preschool as well as make friends.

“ There are lots of ways people in Wales can get advice and training to help with this, including the **Talk With Me website**, and searching for the 'children's service' or 'speech and language therapy' section on your health board's website.

“ Staff or teachers at preschools can also discuss simple things that you can add into your daily routines at home as well as being out and about. ”

Lisa Davies, Early Years Education Advisory Teacher at Conwy County Borough Council

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