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Speech and Language Strategies for Language Delayed Children

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Teaching your child to talk may seem like an easy task. Unfortunately, there is no magic cure for a language delay and not all strategies work with all children, as you may already know. If your child has been diagnosed with a language delay, there are several strategies that you should learn and perform daily with your child. The most important principle to keep in mind is that a natural environment should be maintained so that the child feels a *need* to communicate and in turn he will *enjoy* communicating. In other words, avoid “forcing” unnatural communication or anticipating your child’s verbalizations before he actually speaks. Here are the techniques that you can use:

• **Encourage and respond to your child’s attempts to communicate.** Answer your child’s communicative attempts (cooing, babbling, eye contact, gesturing) by describing what you are doing or talk to your child about what is going on while mirroring his communicative attempts.

• **Follow your child’s lead.** Talk to your child about things *he’s* interested in at that moment. Take advantage of his focused attention and he will be more likely to want to talk about it.

• **Talk about objects or events that can be readily seen.** Avoid speaking about things that are not in the child’s direct view or events that occurred in the past, or future. Your child will be more likely to understand language that is spoken about the immediate context at hand. In other words, do not talk about it unless he is currently engaged in something that involves that target word or words.

• **Shorten your sentences.** Keep in mind your child’s current level of ability; if he speaks in 1-2 word utterances, do not speak in sentences longer than 4-5 words in length. Furthermore, avoid connecting two thoughts together such as “let’s get dressed and go see Grandma and her sweet kitty cat.”

• **Repeat and restate.** Repeat the same thing a few different ways and in different contexts. For example, in the kitchen you can say “Want a cookie? …You want cookie? … A cookie? …Yes! A cookie!” then later in the bath you can say, “Want the duck? … You want duck?... A duck, yes!” Repetition in different contexts will help your child learn language.

**• Exaggerate your intonation and stress target words.** Don’t be afraid to “act silly” and really emphasize target words you want your child to say. Use wide eyes, over-exaggerate your articulation and use gestures to highlight words and entice your child to say them with you. Be enthusiastic!

**• Use simple, concrete vocabulary.** Avoid big words and abstract concepts. For example, say “ tree” as opposed to “magnolia tree” or say “run, jump” instead of “exercise.” Use words with multiple meanings, such as “go” or “play”.

**• Talk at eye level with your child.** Whenever possible, sit on the floor with your child to help facilitate his eye contact with you and capture his attention. Focusing on your facial expressions and oral movements as you are talking will heighten his awareness and help him better understand and possibly repeat what you are saying.

• **Encourage eye contact when speaking with your child.** Point to your eyes and “get in his personal space” to help facilitate eye contact with your child. This will aid in his comprehension of what you are saying.

• **Involve your child in activities.** Encourage your child to participate in play tasks, read together, go on walks, engage him in physical play or outdoor activities. Model simple phrases to describe the actions, events and objects that are experienced during those activities. Language is learned best by *doing.*

• **Slow down and pause.**  Reduce your rate of speech and exaggerate natural pauses in speech to highlight each individual word and the sounds that make up each word.

• **Create communicative opportunities.**  Let your child make a choice between objects by pointing or verbalizing his decision. Also, instead of placing all of his favorite bath toys within reach, place them above or beyond his reach in order to create the opportunity for him to make a request for a toy.

• **Avoid using baby talk.** When possible, encourage your child to use adult forms of words. Avoid imitating your child’s immature or incorrect articulation of words. Do not repeat or reuse those incorrect words in other contexts; model the correct form of the word, make eye contact with your child and gesture towards your mouth as you repeat the word to aid his focus on proper articulation of the word.

• **Don’t dominate the conversation.**  Try to avoid overwhelming your child with constant verbal stimulation. Pauses invite your child to interject his own verbalizations and naturally participate in the “conversation” as opposed to merely answering your questions or repeating words upon request. On this note, do not frequently point to objects and ask, “what’s that?” as some children tend to withdraw from direct “commands” to label objects.

• **Demonstrate your expectations.** After modeling a simple word or sentence for your child, maintain his eye contact and gesture to him to indicate that you are patiently waiting for him to respond. You may also gesture or say what the intended answer/response may be to model language for him and hopefully elicit an imitation.

• **Put words “in his mouth”.** If you could get inside your child’s thoughts, what would he say? Try to model for him what he would say using age-appropriate words and phrases as he completes tasks or engages in activities. For example, if he is playing with a ball, you can say, “I like my ball…. Roll ball! …. Play ball, Mama!”

• **Avoid changing the topic.** If your child is focused on one activity or object, try not to divert his attention by speaking about a different task or event he is not focused on.

• **Encourage turn-taking.** Just as conversational partners “take turns” talking, your child should be engaged in tasks that make turn- taking possible, such as stacking blocks, rolling a ball back and forth, placing puzzle pieces in a puzzle, or putting the pieces on Mr. Potato Head. You may need to model the phrase, “my turn” and gesture to help him understand turn-taking.

• **Make use of joint attention.** Joint attention occurs when you and your child are focused on the same task or object at the same time. When this occurs, your child is more tuned into your speech than during other times when he is not sharing your attention. Increase your speech volume, vary your intonation and over-exaggerate your articulation; he will be more likely to imitate your words and learn language when joint attention occurs.

• **Talk with your hands.** Gesturing is an important part of communication. This involves sign language, pointing to objects or pictures or hand movements that help emphasize the meaning in our words. Encourage your child to talk with his hands as well, and this will help him better communicate his wants or needs. (Take caution, though, and do not allow your child to use his hands to communicate at all times!) The object is to use sign or gestures to bridge the gap between non-verbal and verbal communication.

• **Decrease ambient noise.**  Turn off the TV, or other noise makers in the house and let your child concentrate on the sounds of the words you are speaking. The less distraction he has, the more successful he will be at acquiring language. If your household has loud levels of noise, try pulling your child into a quite room for one-on-one “talking time” to help him focus only on your voice for several minutes while playing or reading a book.

• **Place favorite toys or snacks out of reach.** Allowing your child to have the freedom to access any toy/snack at his will eliminates his need or desire to communicate to obtain the item. Placing items out of reach will create communicative opportunities for your child to ask for items.

• **Use your fingers to draw attention to your mouth.** When teaching a word or phrase to your child, point to your lips and gently tap to highlight the syllabic content of the word or words. In turn, gently tap your child’s lips to cue him to repeat what you just said. (Your speech therapist can demonstrate appropriate cueing placements for individual speech sounds.)

• **Do not encourage jargon.** Occasionally young children will use jargon to communicate. Do *not* pretend to understand them. If the topic of conversation is discernable, model an age-appropriate phrase for your child. If the topic cannot be determined, do not play a guessing game with your child. Simply state, “I do not understand”, and try to redirect your child’s attention to a task where you can model appropriate language for your child in context.