



WE CAN TALK – Tips for enhancing your child’s speech and language (continued)

The second technique in WE CAN TALK

E – Exaggerate and entice with your gestures and voice to increase imitation

Some children do not show awareness when people talk to them. Others do not watch, stay engaged, or show an interest in what others are doing. There are also other children who ARE observant of people but are limited in their expressive vocabulary, have difficulty pronouncing words, or are unable to imitate what others do or say. Regardless of your child’s ability to watch and copy people, he can benefit from this technique:



E - Exaggerate and entice with your gestures and voice to increase imitation.

In order to learn and communicate effectively with others, children need to pay attention to your face, your actions, the different sounds you make, and your words. That state of “watchfulness” sets the stage for imitation.

So how do you help your child be “watchful” of and notice the things that you say and do?

The easy answer is this: you need to be more interesting than all of the other distractions in your child’s world. It’s easy to say but not as easy to put into

practice, but you start with thinking about how you can make your voice and gestures more exciting. Here are some questions to ask yourself as you think about exaggerating and enticing with your voice and gestures to help your child learn.

What gets your child’s attention or interest?

Think about activities that you have done with your child or things you have said that have attracted his attention or that make him copy you. (Especially note those times when he looks, smiles, laughs at you, does what you do, or imitates your words. Also refer to the activities you noted in Technique number 1 – Wonder about what your child is communicating. Wait and Watch.)

In the activities listed above, why do you think your child pays attention or copies you during those times? What are the strategies that seem to work? Is it the words you say, how you say them, or how you use gestures?

Now think about how you might try those same strategies in other activities or daily routines. Much of what you do may fit the technique of exaggerating and enticing with your gestures and voice. Write down some ideas.

Are there any objects that your child especially enjoys and can play with for long periods of time?

If there are objects that your child really enjoys, how might you be able to participate with your child using that object? Think about ways to exaggerate and entice with your voice and gestures using that object.

Using activities your child loves will be excellent motivators for increasing your child’s desire to stay with an activity and notice you. The goals of this second technique are to:

1. increase your child’s ability to watch and listen to others,

2. increase your child's ability to imitate and spontaneously use gestures and verbalizations, and
3. increase the number of activities and the amount of time that a child can stay with an activity, especially activities involving you.

You often have to trick children into imitating you by getting them so enthralled with what you are doing that they can't stand NOT to attempt it themselves. There are two things to think about to achieve the 3 goals listed above: **Exaggerate** your **gestures** and **exaggerate** your **voice**. Let's discuss some of the different ways you can exaggerate with your gestures and voice to entice your child to imitate.

- **Exaggerate your gestures.** Think about the types of exaggerated movements you can make during play and during daily routines to get your child to watch what you are doing and imitate. Also, when choosing toys and activities, keep in mind that ones with multiple pieces or that can be repeated multiple times are excellent. Repetition is often needed to encourage imitation skills.
 - During a daily routine like bath time, think about how you can make any bath toys (ducks or fish) swim, walk, jump, or fly and exaggerate the motion to attract your child's attention.
 - In anything you do, talk with your hands and your facial expressions. Be as animated as you can. Your comfort level with this kind of silliness will dictate how much you use gestures. Your child's reaction will dictate how much or how little exaggeration is needed to attract his attention.
 - Try a "clean up game" by putting objects such as blocks in a container. First think about how many different ways you can put a block in a box. Be creative by making the object fly, jump, move like a car, etc. (Remember to use activities or toys that are motivating to your child – blocks may not be the best toy for your child. Use your list above of enjoyable activities or objects.) Choose activities that contain multiple pieces or that can be repeated multiple times. This increases the repetition which is often needed to encourage imitation skills.
 - Another possible activity would be to put something silly on your head and "sneeze" it off while saying "ahchoo." Did your child notice you? Did he laugh? Did he indicate that he wanted you to do it again? If he is motivated to watch you, give the object to him to see if he'll try to copy you.

- Other large motor activities such as playing chase games, swinging your child, flying like an airplane, or moving like animals on the ground are wonderful activities to help your child notice you. Even imitate your child's movements at times, as this may be the best way to start imitation.
- You can also exaggerate your gestures by holding objects up to your face, naming the objects before giving them to your child. You could also give the object first to your child, but while he is holding the object, hold his hand and object to your face while you say the word. The cue of seeing your face may be what he needs to really listen to the word and visualize how it is pronounced. After doing that, you can try taking his hand and object up to his face and tell him, "Your turn," to see if he will try to copy you.
- Teaching your child sign language is an excellent way to encourage imitation, and studies show that signing does not interfere with speech and language development.
- Another key factor in helping your child be more watchful of others is to teach him to pay attention to **pointing**. While holding your child, point to objects by doing "tours of the house," watching if your child is able to follow your pointing. When you are outside and hear different noises such as cars or airplanes, point to them. When you see interesting objects, point to them. Also, when you are performing daily routines around the house, teach your child to put things in particular places by pointing and saying, "Put it right here." When showing your child a book, increase his ability to follow a point: **Exaggerate your pointing** by tickling the pictures, patting them, and knocking on them. How many different ways can you **exaggerate** how you point to things? Try several ways and watch your child's reaction.
- Teach your child to give his hand to you when you are giving him an object/item that he wants. Asking for his hand increases a child's ability to watch you and gives your child a cue that there is a connection between a person and the object that he desires. The physical connection of holding his hand while giving him things such as snacks or toys gives your child the awareness that YOU are the one giving it to him. As simple as that sounds, this ability to shift between desired objects and people is harder to learn in some situations than one might

think. As you give your child snacks or objects, name them, use sound effects, and exaggerate your movements as you try to maintain his attention.

- **Pair your gestures with sounds or words.** At first children may have an easier time imitating gestures than sounds or words. If you pair the gestures with an enticing sound or word, it will increase the likelihood that your child will attempt to imitate the sound as well as the gesture. All of the activities listed above should be accompanied often by a sound, word, or phrase.
- **Exaggerate, entertain, and entice with your voice.** When you talk to your child, think about how you speak and how exciting your voice sounds. When you exaggerate or entice with your voice, though, don't distort your voice or words to the point that your child doesn't understand you. Distortion is NOT what we are recommending. We are recommending a bit more animation and excitement to your voice and words. Sometimes an "exaggeration" may involve whispering, speaking more slowly, and using more inflection in the words you say. Be animated!
 - Put added emphasis on sounds in a word, making the word sound like its meaning. For example, when saying the word "pop" during bubble blowing, produce it like the sound of a bubble popping. Make the word "come to life."
 - You can also extend the vowels in a word or consonants like m, n, and s in words to give added emphasis to those sounds. For example, if I were saying the word "milk" during meal time, I might emphasize the "m" in the word by saying "mmmmilk," rubbing my tummy while I said the word to give the visual effect of indicating it is yummy. This technique is especially true with children who are having difficulty producing a particular word. How you model or exaggerate a word depends on how your child currently produces it. For example, is your child says "at" for "hat", you will want to perhaps exaggerate the /h/ sound by blowing the air on your hand while you say the word. If your child says "ha" for "hat", then you will want to exaggerate the final /t/ sound by perhaps tapping your mouth while saying /t/ and saying it more loudly.
 - Invite your child to copy you at times. It's OK to say, "your turn" or "do it with me" to let your child know that you are confident he can try. Positive encouragement is different, though, than pressure to imitate.

- Exaggerating your voice can be done naturally with music and while reading to your child. This will be discussed more completely with the techniques dedicated to books and music. However, begin to think about using music and books to help your child be more watchful and imitate.

List some times during the day and some of the words and gestures that you will be **exaggerating** throughout this week. Perhaps focus on words and activities that your child found the most motivating. Pick an activity such as going to the grocery store or playing with play doh and write down some of the ways you can say certain sounds, words, or phrases related to those activities. For example, try several ways to say “apple”. _____

Is your child showing good BALANCE?

In this technique you want to help your child learn to watch your gestures and listen to the words and sounds you and others say. Sometimes children show ability to hyper-focus on toys or certain objects but are very limited in the ability to focus on you or other people. The important thing to look for in all areas of communication is the all-important word called BALANCE! A child who can stay attentive to a specific activity for long periods of time can have a wonderful gift of great concentration or an interference in his ability to learn because he cannot focus on people. Ask yourself these questions:

Does my child focus on some activities SO MUCH that they do not allow him to explore other toys or other uses of toys?

Does my child focus so much on certain toys or objects, that it is difficult to get him to watch me?

If your answer is yes, then your goal will be two-fold: 1. to expand his ability to be watchful of a wide variety of toys and activities, and 2. to expand his ability to shift his attention from his desired objects to people.

Building on Techniques 1 and 2 – As you **exaggerate** and **entice** with your voice and gestures, also combine that with Technique 1 by **waiting** and **watching** to see if your child responds with imitation or any other response. Remember that even a smile is a response, and that tells you your child is engaged and enjoying the interaction you created with him. Occasionally try saying “your turn” or “you do it” to your child and give that look of

anticipation that you can't wait to see what kind of turn he will take. You have completed the first 2 techniques. Try to combine both of them during your daily routines and move on to Technique Number 3.