

From Cries to Conversations:

The Development of Communication Skills From Birth to 3

Communication emerges from the natural human desire to connect with others by exchanging ideas and feelings, both verbally and non-verbally. Children are driven to communicate, starting at birth, to get a need met, express a thought or feeling, and to establish and maintain interactions with friends and family.

Babies communicate with sounds (crying, cooing, squealing), facial expressions (eye contact, smiling, grimacing), and gestures or body movements (moving legs in excitement or distress, and later, actions such as pointing.) In the second year they begin to use one- and two-word combinations, and by the time they are 3 years old they are combining 3 or more words in simple sentences!

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

- **Respond to your baby's gestures, facial expressions, and sounds.** When he gazes at you, make eye contact and talk with him. When he is making sounds, reaching out, or kicking his legs, respond to what you think he is "telling" you. "You want me to bring this rattle closer to you, don't you?" Or, "You are lifting your arms up to tell me you want to be picked up." Or, "I see you arching your back. You are done playing and need a break." When he gazes at something, talk about what he sees: "You're looking at the cat. He's white and really furry!" These immediate and sensitive responses tell your baby that his early efforts at communicating are important and effective. This encourages him to continue working on these skills.
- **Talk and sing with your child.** Then pause and give her time to respond with sounds, gestures, facial expressions, and words. This teaches new vocabulary and encourages your child to engage in back-and-forth interactions.
- **Share books starting in the earliest months.** Engage your child's participation in whatever way he is able at his age. Point to and ask questions about the pictures in books: "What happened to those three pigs?" Pause to give your child time to respond before you provide the "answer." Ask older toddlers to tell you the story in their own words. Reading fuels language and thinking skills. Take your child to story-time at your local library where he will enjoy sharing books with you and with peers.
- **Narrate what you do as you go through your daily routines.** This helps your child connect words with objects and actions. "I'm washing the dishes. I'm squeezing the yellow dish soap into the warm water." Talk about what you're doing as you care for your child. "Here we go into the bathtub. Your arms, legs, and tummy are getting all wet. Rubber Ducky is having a bath, too." Talk as you play together: "That rattle makes a loud noise!" Or, "You're brushing your dolly's hair. It is so long. Are there any tangles?" With verbal toddlers, you can create a tradition where family members share something about their day at dinnertime or bedtime. Ask your child questions about her day. Once she is using words, encourage her to ask you questions, too.
- **Expand your child's vocabulary.** If he says "ball," you can say, "Yes, that's your big, red ball."
- **Make your requests clear, simple, and appropriate for your child's age and ability.** For a 12-month-old you can give one-step directions like, "Go get the ball." For a child getting closer to 2 years, give a two-step command like, "Please go to your room and get your shoes." Be sure you have your child's attention first by calling her name or gently touching her and looking directly at her at her eye level. You can ask an older child to repeat the request to make sure she heard and understood the communication.

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- **Help your child tune in to other's non-verbal communication.** "Luis, do you see how Giselle is holding her hands up to cover her face? She doesn't like it when you throw the ball so hard. It scares her. If you throw the ball softer she will want to keep playing catch with you." Encourage older, verbal toddlers to tell their friends how they feel.
- **Help your child develop a "feelings" vocabulary.** Provide the words for her experience. "You're sad because Mommy left for her trip. You miss her when she's gone. Let's send her a photo of you by text. She'll love that!" Keep in mind that feelings are not good or bad, they just are. Sometimes parents are afraid that talking about an intense, difficult feeling will intensify it, but usually the opposite is true. When their feelings and experiences are named and recognized, children are better able to cope effectively with these emotions.