

COVID-19: Speech and Language Therapy at Home

During this COVID-19 pandemic, we know that many therapy services have been postponed for toddlers, preschoolers, and school-aged children with Down syndrome.

[Diana Brenner-Miller](#), one of the pediatric speech and language pathologists in our MassGeneral Hospital Down Syndrome Program, has put together some helpful tips for caregivers trying to manage from home. We also want to say: we know that it is hard for caregivers to juggle so many roles during this stressful time. So, take these tips in bite-size pieces and give yourself a deserved break if you cannot get to all of these.



Toddler / Preschooler

Tips for Improving Attention to and Comprehension of Language

Practice *identifying body parts on a doll/animal or on another person*. This is an easier task than identifying body parts on oneself. If your child doesn't respond, model the correct response or take their hand and gently guide it to the correct response. Provide praise and specific feedback, such as "Yayyyy! You found Daddy's NOSE! That's his NOSE!"

Practice *identifying familiar objects in play*. Start with just a few objects in the floor and ask your child to hand you or identify a specific toy. Give the direction once and pause. If they do not respond after a few seconds (see the "perfect pause" technique below), give the direction again and point to the correct response. Pause again. If they do not respond again, help them pick up the correct toy and give specific praise ("Car! You found the car! Great work finding the car!")

Remember, when you give a direction, *support your child in following that direction*. If you give a direction and then abandon it, it reinforces the idea that language can be "tuned out".

Try using *picture symbols* to support in *making choices* for activities. This teaches meaningful choice-making and helps to decrease frustration. Using picture symbols does not stop a child from leaning to speak, and can actually facilitate spoken language development.

Encourage *cleaning up activities* when your child is finished with them before making a new choice/moving on to a new activity. This encourages meaningful choice-making and goal-directed behavior.

Increase pause time to allow your child to process language. Waiting the right amount of time can be tricky because it is different for every child. There are two difficulties that keep adults from achieving the "Perfect Pause:" not waiting long enough, which does not give the child a chance to initiate or respond, or waiting too long. The majority of adults do not wait long enough. How can we tell how long is long enough? Try asking a familiar question or giving a command that you know the child knows and see how long it takes for him to respond. Add a few seconds to that, to allow for extra processing and formulation time for a less familiar question/response. The Key: Wait just a little longer than you would naturally. (Tip adapted from "The Perfect Pause" by Little Stories Early Speech & Language Development —found at thelittlestories.com.)

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Strategies to Promote Language Development:

Interpreting: *Interpret your child's gestures and actions into meaningful utterances.* For example, if your child pulls on a toy and grunts, you might say, "That toy is stuck. It won't come out. Do you need help?" You can interpret words and gestures that you don't understand. For example, if your child says, "Ga," you might say, "More milk. Here is more milk. You need some more milk." You can also add what you believe to be the 'bigger' meaning that the child is expressing using single words or gestures.

Self-Talk: *Talk about what you are doing.* A great way to give a child a lot of chances to hear words and sentences is by talking to yourself. For example, as you bake cookies you could say, "I am opening up the chocolate chips. Oops. Two chips fell out. Let's pour in the chips. In go the chips. Time to stir. I need a big spoon. Stir, stir, stir. I'm missing the chips in the dough."

When you read with your child, try ignoring the written words and talking about the pictures instead. Ask a question and answer it yourself, "Hmmm. Where is the dog. He is under the bed." Guess what will happen next; describe how you think the character feels. Talking about your actions and thoughts may seem strange at first but it really helps children learn about language.

Parallel Talk: *Talk about what your child is doing.* Another way to let your child hear words and sentences is to talk about what your child is doing while he/she is involved in an activity. For example, as your child plays with a truck you might say, "You have a red truck. Up goes the truck on the ramp. It's going up very slowly. Up, up, up. Oh, no! The truck fell in the big hole. Crash." When you are reading with your child and he points/looks at the picture, talk about the picture, "That is the cow. The cow says 'moo!' Moo cow."

Expansion: *Expand what your child says.* When children start to talk they often have more thoughts, ideas and feelings than words and sentences to express them. Try restating what your child says by adding words or making it into a sentence. For example, if your child says 'dog,' expand it to, "dog running." If your child says 'dog run' expand it to, "The dog is running. Run dog." You can do the same while reading books. For example, if your child says 'hot,' you might say, "Too hot. The soup is too hot." Talking with your child while reading books together can be a great way to improve his language skills.

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How to Facilitate Vocabulary Growth at Home and at School

- **Make it Personally Relevant:** Focus on developing your child's vocabulary for common items. Think about what items they come in contact with daily (e.g., clothing, food, household items). Target developing vocabulary of these items first. Call attention to common labels, actions and attributes to increase your child's vocabulary while interacting naturally with toys and objects throughout the day.
- **Teach Thematically:** Facilitate continued development of play skills by encouraging your child to expand on their pretend play schemes. Model daily activities in which more than one play scheme can be performed, such as preparing and cooking a meal with pretend food.
- **Repeat, Repeat, Repeat:** Present words to your child in a variety of situations with repeated exposure to each.
- **Simplify the Syntax of Your Input:** Speak to your child in short, simple sentences, while focusing on key vocabulary words and concepts.
- **Use New Vocabulary in Many Sentence Types:** Use new vocabulary words in different types of sentences, such as statements, questions and commands.
- **Link to New Contexts:** Relate common vocabulary items and concepts to novel situations. This will increase the ability to generalize this word or concept to other situations.

Use Multi-Sensory Learning: Teach vocabulary and language through multi-sensory activities. Have your child interact with a new object with all of their senses. Label this new object as they look at it, touches it, listens to it, etc.