

Part 3 – Speech, language and communication: after the first word

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My child is saying some single words. What comes next? What can I do to help?

When your child is using single words, there are three paths that you will need to follow:

- oral motor skills/speech
- horizontal language development
- vertical language development

One path is to work on oral motor skills and sound making so that your child's speech is understandable. This is known as speech intelligibility. The speech-language pathologist can help your child learn to speak more clearly.

Second is horizontal language development, i.e. you want to help your child develop more concepts and increase vocabulary skills. You can do that by involving your child in many language experiences and labeling with vocabulary words what is happening at the time. For example, when you walk outside, labeling trees, flowers, birds and clouds, looking at them, listening, smelling, engaging your child's senses in learning the words for what he is seeing. When you are at the playground, provide words for the equipment your child is playing on, and use the words slide, down, on, under, up and behind to describe what is happening. Read books with your child about their experiences, e.g. walking in the city, going to the beach, snow and winter.

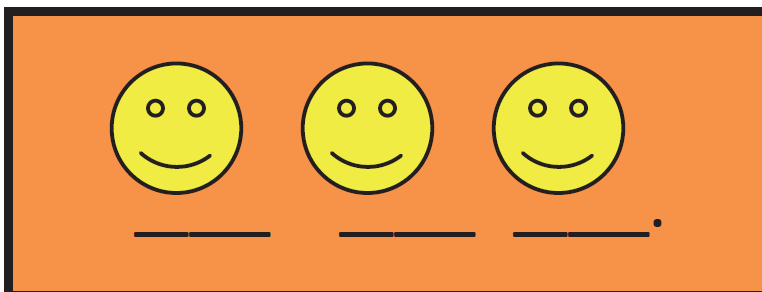
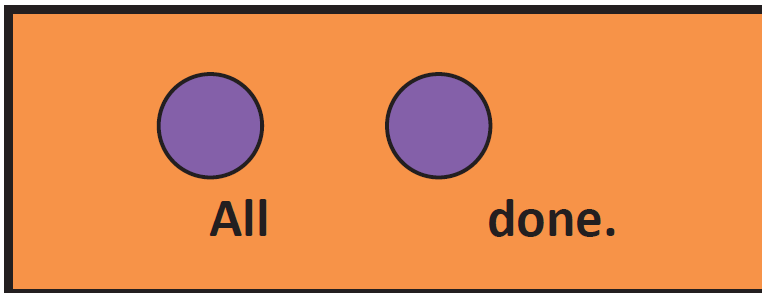
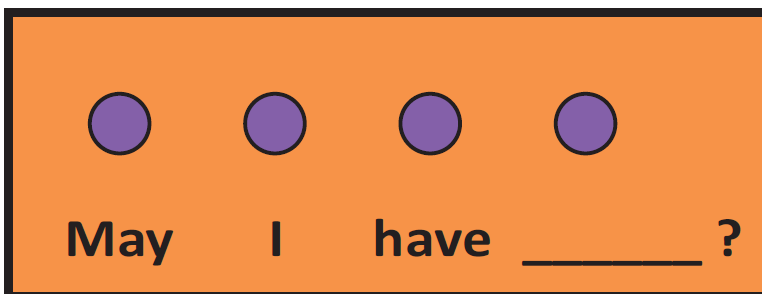
Third is vertical development, i.e. helping your child learn to combine words and use 2 word phrases. Research tells us that children with Down syndrome are ready to combine words when they have a 100 word vocabulary (either signs or speech). Then they can combine the single words that they already know and use, and learn to say big car instead of car.

The best method for helping your child combine words into multi-word phrases is using imitation with expansion and a pacing board. To use imitation with expansion:

1. Repeat what your child says. By repeating the word, you show that you understand him and that he used a correct word.
2. Expand what your child says by one word.

You may present the imitation with expansion many times before your child begins to use two words; just keep at it. This type of activity lends itself well to play and to activities of daily living, for example, your child says sock, you say sock on; your child says ball, you say roll ball or throw ball.

Using a pacing board will help your child learn to say 2 word and 3 word combinations, such as go out and go out now. The pacing board is a cueing system that provides a visual and tactile reminder of the number of words your child is able to use in combination (see below). The pacing board may consist of two colored dots on a piece of cardboard, or a square of velvet and a square of sandpaper mounted on a board, two colorful stickers mounted on a piece of cardboard — or anything else that your child likes. When you use imitation with expansion, point to the dots on the pacing board as you say each word. For example, point to the first dot when you say roll and the second dot when you say ball. Place your hand over your child’s hand and guide him to point to the dots. Children catch on to using the pacing board very quickly.



Once your child is using 2 word phrases consistently, you want to help him learn to use 3 word phrases, such as “daddy throw ball.” You can use the same techniques, imitation with expansion and the pacing board with 3 dots. What we find effective in therapy is to use a 2 sided pacing board with 2 dots on 1 side (what your child can say) and 3 dots on the flip side (what you are stimulating). Another way to practice multiword phrases is using children’s

books with predictable phrases. When you read children's books with your child, choose books that have phrases that are repeated, e.g. all gone, chicken soup with rice, the sky is falling, Where's Spot?. That way, your child can learn the phrase and say it when it comes up in the book. You can also use carrier phrases such as "I see" or "I want," so that your child learns the phrase and just needs to add the one word that will complete the message, e.g. I see daddy or I want ball. You can use a pacing board to teach carrier phrases. When your child is able to say phrases, ask questions, and use early sentences, you can write the words on the pacing board. Your child may even be able to read the words.

What speech and language skills prepare your child for preschool?

A. Comprehension (also called understanding, or receptive language skills)

This includes understanding language as well as following directions. When you read books with your child, talk about the characters and what happens in the book. Point to the pictures. Reading together is a good way to practice comprehension. When you have finished reading the book, go back over the pictures in the book, and ask your child questions. If your child cannot answer, you answer the question, and ask your child to repeat the answer. Following directions is an important skill in preschool and the early school years. Practice at home in everyday activities. For example, begin with a 1 stage command. "Get your jacket," and progress to "We're going outside. It's cold. Get your jacket and hat and gloves."

B. Semantics (vocabulary and meaning)

Help your child learn more and more vocabulary words. Talk with your child, and give them the words for everything that they see. Sometimes, your child will ask, "what's that?" but even when they don't ask, provide new words. You can also describe what your child is doing when they are playing, e.g. you are taking the cow out of the barn. You put the cow on the grassy field so that he can eat and rest. Language practiced in preschool includes, colors and numbers and shapes. Preschool teachers are usually in close touch with parents. They let you know what concepts and vocabulary were worked on, so that you can reinforce the concepts in daily life at home and in the community. For example, for Halloween, they may work on orange and black and round; for Valentine's Day, red and hearts.

C. Morphosyntax (grammar and word parts)

When your child learns concepts such as past tense and plural, they also learn the word endings that go with those concepts, e.g. dog and dogs, walk and walked, run and ran, child and children. When your child begins putting sentences together, he learns about word order, e.g. I am going. Are you going? It is snowing. Yesterday, it snowed.

D. Expressive Language Skills (spoken language)

Receptive language skills involve listening and understanding. Expressive language skills involve speaking and formulating messages. If your child cannot yet speak, it might involve sign, language, or pictures or a high tech device to help your child communicate. If your

child is having difficulty with speaking, a speech-language pathologist can evaluate your child to determine whether the difficulty is with formulating and expressing messages, or with the motor production of speech. Then, she can work on expressive language and oral motor skills and speech, as needed.

E. Pragmatics (social language in daily living)

This includes greetings, hellos and goodbyes, and daily conversation, such as giving your name and asking the other person's name. When you talk with your child, and when they watch you talking with others, you are practicing conversations and social language. During daily living, we often use the same phrases, e.g. Hi, How are you doing? High five. Let's go now. These conversational words and phrases can be taught as a unit. They are known as scripts, and once your child learns scripts for daily living, you will hear her using those scripts.

F. Pre-literacy skills (the skills that prepare you for reading)

These skills are generally worked on in preschool and kindergarten, and mastering these skills will prepare your child to read.

Phonological Awareness Skills:

- Taking words apart (map is m-a-p)
- Putting words together (d-o-g is dog)
- Counting the syllables in words (may clap or bang a drum, e.g. railroad is 2 syllables)
- Rhyming words (in school, sometimes called word families, such as cake, bake, rake)
- Identifying initial sounds in words

During the period from 1-4 years of age, your child is mastering concepts and words for language, skills for speaking, social skills, and early conversational skills. By the time of preschool, your child will be using single words and multiword phrases. Your child will be able to recognize and respond to his/her name, and follow simple directions. Your child will be interacting with parents, siblings, relatives, teachers, and other important people in their environment. Your child will be on the road to more complex and advanced language skills during the school years.

For further reading:

Kumin, L. (2012). *Early Communication Skills for Children with Down Syndrome (third edition)*. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House.

Parent Resource Information:

Go to <https://www.ndsccenter.org/programs-resources/speech-and-language/>

- The Basis for Speech, Language and Communication in People with Down Syndrome
- Speech and Language Resource Guide for Parents of Infants and Toddlers with Down Syndrome: First Words to Phrases
- Resource Guide to Oral Motor Skill Difficulties in Children with Down Syndrome
- Resource Guide to Childhood Apraxia of Speech in Children with Down Syndrome