



# Oral Language Strategies

## Supporting Communication in the Early Childhood Classroom

These simple and effective strategies can easily be applied in early childhood classrooms to support all children, but particularly children experiencing communication delays, have limited exposure to rich language input and literacy, or who may be learning multiple languages simultaneously. Adult interactions are critical to a child's learning and language development.

### Self-Talk

**Say aloud what you are doing to model the thinking process and language.**



**Adult:** "First, I need to choose which animal I want to color. I like cats, but I remember that I'm supposed to choose an animal that lives in the ocean, so I can't pick a cat. I think I'll choose a shark because it lives in the ocean."

**Adult:** "When a friend hurts my feelings, I can stop and think about what to do. I can tell my friend they made me sad; I can find a different friend to play with; or if I need help I can talk to my teacher."

### Think Aloud

**Ask questions aloud to yourself to demonstrate the act of thinking and problem-solving.**



**Adult:** "I wonder what I can do if I can't open my applesauce. I know the teachers can help me. I remember that I'm supposed to raise my hand and ask for help. I also know my friends might be able to help."

### Parallel Talk

**Say aloud what the child is doing.**



**Adult:** "You're building a car track. The track has a big curve. You put the stop sign next to the tree."

### Recasting through Expansion and Extension



**Restate what the child said using a longer and grammatical sentence (expansion); or add information to what the child said (extension).**

**Child:** (points to a toy car) "Want that."

**Adult expands sentence:** "You want the blue race car."

**Adult extends sentence:** "That blue race car can go fast!"

### Open Ended Questions

**Ask questions that elicit novel language and responses beyond yes/no or single words.**

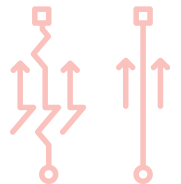


**Adult:** "Why is the science center your favorite?"  
Instead of, "Do you want to go to science center today?"

**Adult:** "What was the best part of your weekend?"  
Instead of, "Did you have a good weekend?"

### Simplify and Scaffold

**Reduce the length and complexity of spoken sentences and provide context and explanations.**



**Adult simplifies sentences with scaffolding:**  
"Pick a helper. Next, find the tool the helper uses in his job. Like this, a chef cooks and a chef uses measuring cups. Chef and measuring cups go together."

Instead of using a complex sentence: "For this activity, you will need to identify the tools that each community helper uses and match it with their occupation."

### Chunk It

**Break down directions and verbal information into individual tasks or isolated steps.**



For multi-step directions, say each directive clearly and separately. Support oral language with a physical reminder or visual to support memory and independence (e.g., emphasize each step while numbering with fingers).

**Adult:** "First, I want you to find your take-home folder; next, hang up your backpack; after you've hung up your backpack, wash your hands; and last, find your spot on the carpet."

**"The limits of my language means the limits of my world.**

Ludwig Wittgenstein

## Offer Choices

**Provide choices to a child so they may express their preference or the order in which they will complete a series of activities.**

**Adult:** "Which would you like to do first, centers or small group?"

**Adult:** "Would you like to use crayons or paint?"

**Adult:** "Which friend would you like to invite to play, Ella or David?"



## Check for Understanding

**Ask the child to repeat a direction that was given aloud.**

**Adult:** "After you finish your snack, throw away your trash, wash your hands, and then choose a book to read. Tell me the three things you need to do after snack."

**Child:** "Throw away my trash, wash hands, and get a book."



## Model

**Say the words for the child if they cannot.**

This strategy is particularly helpful to children who have very limited verbal expression, or who use alternative/augmentative communication (AAC) and benefit from language modeling paired with the alternative representation (e.g., picture icon, object, button on an AAC device, sign).

**Child:** points to a learning center in response to the question, "Which center do you want to play in?"

**Adult:** "You want to play in the block center." This verbalization should be paired with whatever AAC system the child is learning. For instance, if the child is learning a speech-generating device, the adult will select the representation of that choice (blocks) on the AAC device while saying it aloud.



## Comment

**Make statements rather than only ask questions to engage children.**

**Teacher:** "It looks like you're enjoying that book. I love Biscuit. He always gets into trouble!"

Instead of, "What are reading? Do you like that book? What did Biscuit do?"



## Pause

**Offer think time before expecting a response and refrain from asking multiple questions.**

**Adult:** "I wonder how the bear can sleep through the party." (PAUSE)

**Adult:** "I think he might be surprised when he wakes up." (PAUSE)

**Adult:** "I wonder what he will do when he wakes up?" (PAUSE)

Instead of, "I wonder what the bear will think when he wakes up! Do you think he will be surprised? Do you think he'll be happy to see all of his friends? Do you think he'll want to leave his lair or stay with his friends?"



## Pair It

**Pair oral language with a visual or demonstration.**

For multi-step tasks at centers or activities, use visuals to support independence (e.g., the art center has a task strip with symbols representing each step: color, cut, paste, clean up).

Use a visual schedule when reviewing the activities of the day, demonstrate each step of an activity the child will be expected to complete (e.g., show the children how to operate the computer station).



## Sabotage

**Arrange a situation in which a child has to use language to request something he cannot access.**

When setting up an activity, remove necessary materials, or stage a situation in which the child must say what he/she/they need (e.g., opening a desired snack, reaching a toy on high shelf, etc.).



## Repetition

**Use new words repeatedly, modeling them in different contexts throughout the day.**

**Adult:** "We learned about some new shapes yesterday. We learned shapes that are round are not always a circle. If it's shaped like a ball, we call it a sphere. This globe is a sphere. The kickball we use at recess is a sphere. A sphere can be small like a bouncy ball, or really big. Earth is a huge sphere. Who else can think of something that is a sphere?"



**“It is a precious thing to be communicating to children, helping them discover the gift of language and thought.”**

Richard Scarry

