



10 Tips for parents of young children who communicate without words

Adapted from the Hanen guidebook *It Takes Two to Talk*®

These tips are for parents of children who communicate using a combination of sounds, gestures (e.g. pointing, shaking head for “no”, waving “bye”) and eye gaze (looking at you and then at what he is “talking” about). These children are sending clear messages, just not with words.

1. Put the child’s message into words

When your child sends you a message (e.g. by reaching, pointing, looking, making a sound, etc), put into words what you think he is trying to tell you. Keep it short, however, using a short sentence to capture his message. For example, if your child kicks his legs wanting you to push the swing for him, say “You want Daddy to **push!**” or “OK, I’m gonna **push** you”.

2. Stop talking and wait - to give your child a chance to communicate

Just get close to her, look interested and wait for her to send you a message. For example, if a baby is crying and your child is watching the baby intently, **don’t say anything**. WAIT for her to communicate with you. Once she looks at you, points at the baby and makes a sound, for example, then you can respond to what you think she is “saying” – i.e. “Yes, the baby is crying”. Waiting quietly, but looking interested, gives your child a chance to **start** a conversation – and starting conversations is a very important part of becoming a good conversationalist.

3. Pause during a familiar routine to tell your child it’s their turn

When you and your child are doing something that can be repeated over and over like “Tickles” or swinging on a swing —**pause** during the activity from time to time. For example, after you have tickled your child, stop the game and **WAIT** for him to let you know that he wants more tickles (and don’t say anything – just look expectant!). Or, after pushing the swing a few times, stop pushing, and wait (without saying anything) to see if he will “tell” you to push the swing again. This will encourage your child to “tell” you to continue, allowing him to experience the power of communication.

4. Use fun words

When playing with your child, use “fun words” and “fun sounds”, like “wheel!”, “boom!”, “yucky!”, “pop!”, “oink oink”. These words and sounds will catch your child’s attention because they are usually said with a lot of intonation. In addition, these fun words and sounds can be repeated several times during an activity, giving your child lots of opportunities to hear them. Words like “wheel!” and “crash!” can be incorporated into play with cars and trucks. “Pop!” and “uh oh!” can be used during play with bubbles. “Splash!” is a great word to use during bath time. “Bang!” and “Boom!” are great words to use while banging on a toy drum. “Yummy!”, “mmmmm!”, and “yucky” are naturally occurring fun words during meal times. The possibilities are endless! These “fun” words and sounds are often the first “words” children imitate and, in time, say themselves.

5. Imitate your child’s sounds and actions

Imitation is a great way to get an interaction going. When your child bangs on a toy drum, take a turn and bang on the drum too. Then wait to see her reaction. If she says “Oooh” while you blow bubbles, say “Oooh” back, then look at her to see if she has noticed you. If she pushes a car across the floor, do the same, then wait for her reaction. Imitation is a very important skill for your child to learn. Imitating her encourages her to notice you and even imitate you, if she is ready for this.

6. Talk with your child during everyday routines and activities, using the same vocabulary

When you use the same phrases and vocabulary with your child during everyday activities, he will be exposed to familiar, repetitive vocabulary on a daily basis. For example, while getting him dressed in the morning, talk about putting on his pants, his shirt, his socks, etc. When you wash his hands, you can say things like "Let's turn on the **water**..." "The water is nice and **warm**." "Let's wash you with the soap" "Can you **dry** your tummy with the **towel**?" Remember to **WAIT** after you say something to give him a chance to communicate using actions, sounds, gestures etc. When your child hears familiar words and sentences in the same contexts every day, it helps to build his understanding of language.

7. Use gestures, actions, and demonstrations when you speak to your child

While talking about a bird up in a tree, **point** to the bird while you talk about it. When telling your child that it is time to go out, you can **hold up the car keys** or **point to the door**. If you are about to wash your child's hands, you can **make hand washing actions**. These actions and gestures help your child understand what you are saying. It also provides him with examples of nonverbal messages that he can use himself. Gestures are thought to be a "bridge" to learning to say the words.

8. Offer your child a choice

Offer your child a choice so she can send a specific message about something she would like. Hold up two objects and show each object as you say its name. For example, ask, "Do you want some apple or some banana?", showing the apple in your hand as you say "apple", and showing the banana as you say "banana". Your child will likely send you a message in her own way to let you know what she wants. She may look at the item she wants, reach toward it, point to it or make a sound while looking at it. As soon as she lets you know what she wants, give it to her. This allows her to experience the power of communication!

9. Be face to face

When playing with your child, get down so you are at her physical level, eye to eye. Sit facing her when she is in her high chair. Sit or lie on the floor when she is playing on the floor. In this way, your child can see and hear you better, and the connection between the two of you will be stronger. Children love it when adults are right down at their physical level! Plus, you will see your child's focus and interests and will pick up even the most subtle attempts to communicate.

10. Ask fewer questions!

When children aren't talking yet, it's easy to get into the habit of asking them lots of questions. But if your child isn't using words, it can be difficult for him to answer most questions. In addition, your child learns a lot when you **give** him information as opposed to **asking** him for information. Try to reduce questions, balancing them with comments (or statements). Comment about things in everyday life that interest your child. Instead of asking, "What are you making?" as your child squeezes some play dough, comment on he's doing, such as, "Oh, you're squeezing the play dough". Instead of asking "What's that?" while your child looks at a picture of a giraffe in a book, you could comment "That's a tall giraffe!"