



# How to Help Your Child Learn New Words

By **Brittany Da Silva**  
 Clinical Program Assistant, The Hanen Centre

Does the number of words a toddler says really matter in the long run?

Yes, it does! Research shows that the words a young child uses – her vocabulary – is related to later school success [1]. In fact, having a large vocabulary at two years of age predicts a child’s achievement at kindergarten entry in the following areas:

- Reading
- Math
- Behaviour

Better behaviour, reading and math skills at kindergarten entry have been shown to have a lasting impact on children’s school and life success. So, having a large vocabulary at a young age is important!

Children develop their vocabulary and communication skills at different rates. If your child has not achieved the skills listed in the chart below, or if you’re feeling concerned, we recommend that you contact a speech-language pathologist to get an assessment.

Age:	Children should say:	Children should also:	[2,3]
By their first birthday	a few words	-understand words used in your everyday interactions (e.g., cup) -use gestures (e.g., puts her arms up to ask to be picked up)	
By 18 months	<b>at least</b> 24 words	-understand many words and can respond to simple questions (e.g., “where’s your ball?”)	
By two years	<b>at least</b> 100 words	-combine words together to make phrases, (e.g., “daddy hat”) -understand many words and follow two-step directions (e.g., “Go get your shoes and ask daddy to put them on.”)	

Regardless of whether a child has a language delay, if you use Hanen strategies, you can help boost her vocabulary!

## Hanen Strategies that Build Vocabulary

You can help your child learn to say new words through your everyday interactions using the following practical strategies that are grouped based on your child's stage of communication:

- The first three strategies are excellent to use with **all young children** (from infancy into their school-aged years)
- The next strategies are great to use with children who are starting to **understand and say some words**
- The last couple of strategies are best for children who are **talking in phrases and sentences**

## Strategies to Use with All Young Children

### Observe, Wait and Listen (OWL)

- **Observe** what your child is interested in – it can be helpful to get **face to face** with your child to see exactly what has captured her attention (e.g., the playdough is stuck inside of the cookie cutter) and to show that you're interested in what she's doing.
- **Wait** (without talking) for your child to send you a message. Some parents find it helpful to silently count to five before talking.
- **Listen** for any way that your child sends you messages (e.g., she might make a sound, say a word and/or show you the cookie cutter).

When you Observe, Wait and Listen to your child's messages, you let her start the interaction and lead it! Children are motivated to interact when you're talking about their interests and they get to lead the interaction.

### Follow your Child's Lead

After you OWL and your child sends you a message, follow their lead by:

- **Responding immediately!** This shows your child that you've heard her message and are interested in what she said/communicated.
- **Interpreting** your child's message – put into words what you think she's trying to tell you. In the example above with the playdough, you may say, "The playdough is stuck!" This shows her the words she could use to express her ideas when she's ready.
- Making a fun **comment!** For example, "We made really sticky playdough!"
- **Joining in and playing!** Get some playdough for yourself and play like a child would. There's no right or wrong way to play, as long as you're having fun together! Join in and play the way your child is playing (not the way you think she *should* play)! What often works really well is to follow your child's lead by **imitating** her.
- **Imitate** her actions, sounds and words. For example, if your child rolls out some playdough, you can imitate her by getting another rolling pin and rolling out your playdough too.

Children love to interact with adults who follow their lead. When you follow your child's lead, your child will want to take lots of back and forth turns interacting with you! This gives your child many opportunities to learn and say words!

## Reading

Reading books with your child is a great way to build her vocabulary <sup>[4]</sup>! For infants, OWL and follow her lead when you look at books together. She might want to touch different textures in the book, open flaps, or see you make funny gestures or silly noises! For example, if you observe that your child is interested in the elephant in the book, you could pretend that your arm is an elephant trunk and make a trumpeting noise! Match what you say to what she is interested in at that moment (e.g., "I'm an elephant!"). This will make sharing books fun for you and your infant!

Re-reading books may feel repetitive for you, but your child learns so much from hearing those words and phrases again and again.

For children who are starting to talk, continue to OWL and follow her lead when you share books together. Repeating words and phrases in books is a great way for your child to learn and say those words and phrases! Re-reading books may feel repetitive for you, but your child learns so much from hearing those words and phrases again and again!

As your child starts to say more words and sentences, a great way to build vocabulary is to relate what's happening in the book to your child's life (e.g., you could point to a picture and say, "That dog is much bigger than grandma's dog!"). Books also use unfamiliar words and have pictures to help show your child what they mean. After your child learns a new word from a book, use it at another time during the day. (For example, if you're reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* by Eric Carle and your child learns the word cocoon, at bedtime you could say, "You look like you're in a **cocoon**, just like the caterpillar was in our book.")

## Strategies to use with Children who are Starting to Talk

### Actions speak louder than words

Actions, or **gestures**, are a great tool for helping your child learn and say words! When you use gestures, it helps your child see and understand what words mean. Using gestures won't hold your child back from talking. In fact, gestures will help your child use spoken words and phrases sooner. Here's how:

- Children often start using gestures before saying words (e.g., **patting her tummy** to show something is yummy).
- Then, children make the exciting leap to saying their first words (e.g., she might say "**nana**" for banana).
- Next, children will likely start putting gestures and words together to communicate two-part messages (e.g., **pats her tummy** and says "**nana!**" to say, "yummy banana").
- This practice with gestures helps children learn to say the whole two-part message with words (e.g., "**yummy nana!**") <sup>[5]</sup>.

### Repeat, repeat, repeat!

Children need to hear words many, many times before they begin to understand and eventually say them. To figure out the important words to repeat, start by OWLing to find out what your child is interested in. Let your child say or do something to send you a message and then respond with a short grammatical sentence that matches what is happening at the moment. Try to **repeat words at least 3-5 times during an interaction (but not all at once)**.

Here's how a conversation could sound if your child is interested in dropping blocks off the table and hearing the sound they make hitting the floor:

- Child: (pushes block off the table and looks at mom)
- Mom: (*responds immediately* by saying a word that *matches the moment*) “**Boom!** The block went boom!”
- Child: (giggles and pushes another block off the table, and looks at mom)
- Mom: (*responds immediately* by *commenting* and *repeating the word*) “**Boom!** Another block went **boom!**”
- Child: (giggles and pushes another block off the table, and looks at mom)
- Mom: (waits)
- Child: “**Buh**”
- Mom: (*interprets* her child's attempt at saying the word) “**Boom!**”
- Child: (giggles and pushes another block off the table, and looks at mom)
- Mom: (waits)
- Child: “**Boom!**”
- Mom: (*responds immediately* by *building on what her child said*) “**The block made a big noise! The block went boom!**”

## Strategies to use with Children Who Talk in Phrases/Sentences

### Use words that go beyond the here-and-now

Once your child is understanding and using lots of words and little phrases (usually at the toddler stage), you can talk about things that go beyond what is happening right now. This may start with talking about:

- **Feelings** (e.g., “You're sad because grandpa went home.”)
- **Past experiences** that have just happened (e.g., “We saw a dog swimming in the water!”)
- **Why things have happened** (or **solving simple problems**) – these are important to talk though with your child too (e.g., “The soup is **hot!**” (Blow on the soup) “You can't eat it yet because it's too **hot.**”)
- **Pretending** or **imagining** together – this is a really fun way to build your child's vocabulary and language skills (e.g., Pretend to talk on the phone while holding a block to your ear. Then hand your child the “phone” and say, “Grandma wants to say hello.”)

### Don't be afraid of using rare and unusual words!

After children learn basic words that let them talk about everyday things, expose them to unfamiliar words! Even very young children can learn rare and unusual vocabulary! Explain what the new word means and repeat it often. See the steps below for an example of an everyday word (Step 1), a more sophisticated word (Step 2) and a specialized word that relates to a specific area, like science (Step 3). Using sophisticated and specialized words will help your child when they get to school.



Source: [6]

To build your child's vocabulary, the best things to remember are:

- **Observe, Wait and Listen to her**
- **Follow her lead**
- **Read with her**
- **Use gestures**
- **Repeat important words often and throughout the day**
- **Use words that go beyond the here and now**
- **Use rare and unusual words**

Have fun using these strategies to build your child's vocabulary and get your child ready for school success!

These strategies are drawn from The Hanen Centre's [It Takes Two to Talk® guidebook](#). Designed specifically for parents of children with language delays, *It Takes Two to Talk* helps you transform any moment of your child's life into a fun and natural opportunity to build strong language skills. The new fifth edition is now available!

Find more information on building your child's vocabulary in the [2018 Hanen Calendar](#) – a fun and affordable tool packed with 128 strategies to help you promote conversations every day of the year.

## About The Hanen Centre

*Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.*

*For more information, please visit [www.hanen.org](http://www.hanen.org).*

The Hanen Centre is a Registered Charitable Organization (#11895 2357 RR0001)