

# 5 Sneaky Ways to Encourage Your Child's Language Development

Posted on [August 14, 2015](#) by [Teresa Newmark, MA CCC-SLP](#)

Helping your toddler communicate is a super power, and you've got it. Let me help you unleash your inner superhero.

In my last post, [How to Listen So That Your Toddler Can Talk](#), I made the point that the first step to helping your child talk is to listen and follow his interests. But how do you build on those interests to give your child the power to communicate with the world around him? Fortunately, there are a number of tried and true techniques to increase your child's language ability. Here I give you 5 super-tools to put in your communication super-toolbox.

## 1. Get Up Close and Personal

And no, I am not talking about the 1996 movie starring Robert Redford and Michelle Pfeiffer. What I am talking about is getting face to face with your child. Show her that you are engaged and that you are listening. Make it easier for her to see what your mouth is doing, make it easier for her to hear you, make it easier to follow her interests. Do not be the Empire State Building to your child's single story ranch.

## 2. Be A Narrator

Children are born with many things: toes, lungs, the ability to melt our hearts, but they are not born understanding words. As your child's personal superhero, it is your job to "give" them words so that they can start to understand that the things they do and see have language "labels" attached to them. This is where the narrating superpower comes in. In the biz, we call narrating "parallel talk" and "self talk". Parallel talk is when you narrate what your child is doing. Self talk is when you narrate what you are doing. Keep in mind that when you are narrating you still want to be conscious of giving your child an opportunity to take a turn. Careful not to narrate OVER them! This play has dialogue as well.

Using routines is a wonderful, and easy, way to do this. Become a narrator when you are getting dressed: "We are putting on your diaper; next we put your pants on your legs." Children cannot learn words that they don't hear. Imagine the impact of your child hearing this language Every Single Time they get dressed. Forgetting to narrate is a tragic missed opportunity.

## 3. Speak Parentese

Yes, superheroes are multilingual. Part of your job as your child's personal superhero is to learn to speak [Parentese](#). Make your speech salient by using a higher pitch, varying your intonation, slowing

your speech and stressing certain words. Use exaggerated facial expressions and repetition to encourage language development. It may be helpful to shorten your sentences (keeping the grammar intact and accurate) and also provide pauses. These two tricks make it easier for children to imitate sound and words, and imitation is essential step in language development. And that brings me to...

#### **4. Imitate**

Imitation is fundamental to language learning. You will notice that most children imitate words before they say them spontaneously. They imitate two word phrases before they say them spontaneously. That's just the way it goes. But did you know that YOU imitating THEM is fundamental to language learning as well? It models imitation, gives you a way to participate in a communicative interaction with them, and shows them how to have a back and forth conversation. You will find that when you start to imitate them, they will start to imitate you. This is especially helpful when a child is first learning to use sounds and words.

#### **5. Interpret**

One of the advantages of being a parent is that you are FINALLY able to read minds. (See? Superhero!) My daughter says "Cycle HOT no cycle". I can understand why this particular sentence may stump some listeners. However, as her super-mother, it is quite clear to me that she is saying "That motorcycle looks hot because there is exhaust coming out of the tail pipe. I am a little afraid of things that are too hot and therefore I do not particularly want to be near that motorcycle. Frankly I am a little concerned about the noise level as well". Cycle HOT no cycle. Fortunately I am able to use my mind reading powers for good by interpreting and improving on her sentence. "The motorcycle looks hot. You don't like it." Notice I did not correct her. This is an exercise in generosity. I simply "gave" her a better way to communicate.

Use your interpretation skills to help your child achieve the next level of communication. For example, he looks at the ball, and you say "Ball!" Then maybe he uses those aforementioned imitation skills he has been working on to say "ball" for the first time all by himself. Miraculous! Now your baby knows what a ball is and he can say it too!

At this point, you should be basking in the glory of your reclaimed superhero-dom. But would you believe me if I told you there are even MORE tricks to help your child communicate? Your child is learning to associate words with actions and objects and to say them all by herself, but there are bigger and better places to go! In my next post, I will talk about how to help your child add language and say longer phrases and sentences. I will also talk about why your child needs a reason to communicate and how to give him one. Congratulations, you are well on your way to learning your super-skills to make your child a super-communicator.

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This post by Teresa was originally written for [Child Development Club](#).

## How to speak Parentese:

1. Vary your intonation and the melody of your speech. Speak in a sing song.
2. Use a higher pitch.
3. Slow your speech. Use elongated vowels and consonants.
4. Stress certain words by increasing their pitch, intensity and length “How are YOOUUU?”
5. Use precise pronunciation and correct grammar.
6. Use exaggerated facial expressions.
7. Repeat, repeat, repeat

## Pitfalls to avoid:

1. Parentese is not baby talk. Baby talk is associated with changing the pronunciation of sounds to mimic the mispronunciations made by babies (think Elmer Fudd: “Be vewy, vewy, quiet. I’m hunting wabbits). It is also associated with grammatical errors (“me is hungry”). Parentese is in fact the opposite of baby talk. It is language that is spoken precisely and with emphasis. There is a time and place for playing with sounds and words by shortening or manipulating them, but in this instance, “baby talk” is not recommended because it compromises the quality of the language model presented.

2. Parentese is not “dumbed down” adult speech. Rather, it could be described as “amped up” adult speech. We use the same pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary as when speaking to an adult, but add interest and emphasis to make it more exciting, funny, and understandable for a child who is learning language for the first time.

3. Parentese does not leave out words. Speaking in sentences where words are omitted (“I go to bathroom”) is called “telegraphic speech”, and telegraphic speech has no place in Parentese. Grammatically correct, full sentences are essential for helping babies learn the rules of their language.

Speaking Parentese is a wonderful way to bond with your baby, while enhancing his or her language development. It focuses on presenting good language models in a way that is tailored to how babies learn and what babies enjoy.