Speech Therapy Doesn't Stop at the Session

7 simple ways to practice communication with your toddler at home

A parent-friendly guide by Heather Ismay, Speech-Language Pathologist | Utter Success Speech Services



When your toddler is receiving speech therapy, you may wonder what you should be doing at home between sessions. The good news? You don't need to set aside a certain amount of time each day for structured practice, buy special toys, or turn playtime into another therapy session.

Some of the best opportunities to support your toddler's communication happen during things you're already doing every day!

Whether you're getting dressed, eating a snack, playing with favorite toys, or reading a book, you can incorporate simple strategies that encourage your child to understand and use new words.

Here are seven easy ways to support your toddler's communication development at home.

1. Recognize and respond to ALL communication attempts



Communication doesn't begin with spoken words! Toddlers communicate in many different ways, including:

- Pointing or reaching toward something they want.
- Looking at an object or person.
- Using facial expressions.
- Making sounds or babbling.
- Using gestures, such as waving or shaking their head.

The goal is to recognize these attempts and show your child that their communication works.

For example, imagine your toddler reaches for a ball on the shelf and says "ba." You can respond by handing them the ball and saying, "Ball! You want the ball!"

Or perhaps your toddler reaches toward their cup and says "wa" for water. You can honor that attempt by giving them water while modeling the word: "Water! Here's your water."

Even when your child isn't saying a word clearly, their attempt to communicate is meaningful. Responding to these attempts encourages them to keep communicating!

2. Model words throughout the day (and repeat them!)



One of the most helpful things you can do is consistently model words for your toddler. This means using words you want your child to learn while interacting with them.

Children need to hear words many times before they begin to understand and use them independently.

Try repeating important words at least three times during a natural interaction, especially when your child is interested in the object or activity you're talking about.

For example, if your toddler is eating a banana:

- "Banana! You're eating a banana."
- "Yum! Banana!"
- "Do you like your banana?"

Or if they're playing with a car:

- "Car! You have a car."
- "The car goes!"
- "Wow, fast car!"

The more opportunities your child has to hear meaningful words in context, the more opportunities they have to learn what those words mean and eventually use them themselves.

3. Use songs and playful routines with gestures



Songs and familiar play routines are wonderful ways to encourage early communication. Repetitive songs give children opportunities to hear the same words and phrases over and over again.

Even better? Choose songs that include hand movements and gestures!

Some favorites include:

- **The Wheels on the Bus:** Practice gestures for "wheels," "round," "open," "shut," and "beep."
- **Itsy Bitsy Spider:** Use your fingers to make the spider climb, and model "up," "down," and "rain."
- **One Little Finger:** Point to different body parts while modeling words like "nose," "head," and "tummy."
- **If You're Happy and You Know It:** Practice actions such as clapping, stomping, and waving.
- **Peekaboo:** Model "where," "peekaboo," "hi," and "bye."

You can pause during familiar songs to give your toddler a chance to participate with a gesture, sound, or word.

Remember, participation doesn't have to mean singing the words! A smile, movement, gesture, or sound is communication, too.

4. Create opportunities for your toddler to communicate



Sometimes, a small change in your child's environment can create a natural reason to communicate!

You can do this by creating little opportunities for your toddler to request something, protest, comment, or share their attention with you.

Here are a few easy ideas:

- **Leave out a utensil:** Give your toddler their meal but accidentally leave out their fork or spoon. Wait to see if they look toward you, gesture, or attempt to communicate that something is missing.
- **Put a favorite toy out of reach:** Place a favorite toy on a nearby shelf where your child can see it but needs your help getting it.

- **Pause during play:** Blow a few bubbles, then stop and wait. Your toddler may look at you, reach for the wand, make a sound, or attempt to request "more!"
- **Hide a familiar toy:** Place a favorite ball under a blanket and see if your toddler looks for it or communicates that they want help finding it.

When your child communicates, respond to their attempt and model the words that go along with the situation.

For example, if your toddler reaches for the bubbles, you might say, "More bubbles! You want MORE!"

A helpful reminder: These opportunities should feel playful, not frustrating. If your child becomes upset, help them rather than making them work to get what they need. The goal is to encourage communication, not withhold things until they talk.

5. Talk about what you're doing (and what your child is doing!)



One of the easiest ways to introduce new vocabulary is to talk about everyday activities as they happen.

This is sometimes called *self-talk* and *parallel talk*.

- **Self-talk:** Narrate what YOU are doing.

- **Parallel talk:** Narrate what YOUR CHILD is doing.

For example, while getting your toddler dressed, you might say:

- "Let's get your shirt."
- "Arms in!"
- "Pull it down."
- "All done!"

While your toddler is playing with toy animals, you might say:

- "Cow! Moo!"
- "The cow is eating."
- "Oh, the cow fell!"
- "Big cow!"

You don't need to narrate every single thing you do. Instead, look for opportunities to use simple, meaningful words and phrases that match what your child is already interested in.

The trick is to talk about what is happening while it's happening! This helps your toddler connect the words they hear with the people, objects, and actions around them.

6. Model language without asking your child to repeat you



It's natural for parents to want their toddler to practice new words by asking questions like:

- "Can you say ball?"
- "What's that?"
- "Say more!"
- "What color is it?"

While questions and repetition have their place, too many requests to repeat words can make communication feel like a test.

Instead, focus on **modeling the words and phrases you would like your child to learn.**

For example:

Instead of: "Say MORE!"

Try: "More crackers! You want more crackers."

Instead of: "What is that?"

Try: "It's a dog! The dog says woof!"

Instead of: "Can you say GO?"

Try: "Ready, set... GO!"

Modeling means giving your child examples of what they could say without requiring them to repeat you.

The more they hear words used naturally during meaningful interactions, the more opportunities they have to absorb those words and learn how to use them.

And remember: Your child doesn't have to repeat a word immediately for learning to take place!

7. Make screen time an opportunity to connect and communicate



Screen time doesn't have to be a completely passive activity. When possible, watch and interact with your toddler rather than having them watch alone.

This is called **co-viewing**, and it involves sharing the screen experience with your child by talking about, responding to, and engaging with what they're watching.

Here are some ways to make screen time more interactive:

- **Talk about what you see:** "Look! A dog! The dog is running!"
- **Imitate sounds together:** If an animal makes a sound, imitate it and give your toddler a chance to join in.
- **Point things out:** "Where's the ball? There it is!"
- **Make connections:** If a character is eating an apple, talk about apples during snack time later.
- **Pause and interact:** Occasionally pause the video to talk, imitate an action, or share a reaction.

Encourage your toddler to shift their attention between the screen and you. For example, you might point to something on the screen, look toward your child, and comment on what you see together. This shared attention creates opportunities for language learning and interaction.

The goal is to avoid screen time becoming a one-way experience where your child passively watches without interacting with the people around them.

Co-viewing is an important part of making screen time more meaningful for young children. Whenever possible, prioritize interactive, age-appropriate content and balance screen time with play, movement, books, and face-to-face interactions.

A little practice goes a long way!



Happy family playing with building blocks at home

Supporting your toddler's communication doesn't require hours of practice or perfectly planned activities. It's about making small changes to the interactions you're already having every day.

Remember these three things:

- **Follow your child's lead.** Pay attention to what interests them and use those moments to introduce language.
- **Model, model, model!** Give your child plenty of opportunities to hear words and phrases in meaningful contexts.
- **Keep it fun and pressure-free.** Communication should feel natural, enjoyable, and rewarding.

Every gesture, sound, look, and word is an opportunity to connect. Celebrate those attempts, keep talking, and remember that progress happens through all the little moments throughout the day!

And don't worry about doing everything at once. Choose one or two strategies to start incorporating into your daily routines. Small, consistent opportunities can make a meaningful difference.

About the Author



Heather Ismay, M.S., CCC-SLP is a licensed Speech Language Pathologist and owner of Utter Success Speech Services and Utter Success Lab, LLC. She works with toddlers and young children to support speech, language, and communication development through individualized, play-based therapy and family-centered strategies.

Learn more about Speech Therapy services and free communication resources at UtterSuccess.com.