

SPEECH AND LANGUAGE RESOURCE GUIDE

For Parents of Young Children with Down Syndrome

FIRST WORDS TO PHRASES

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Why can't my child communicate?

Children with Down syndrome learn to speak at a slower pace than typically developing children. Parents and professionals, working together, need to help them continue to move forward. If you are reading this, your child is using single words. The next step is to help them combine the words that they know into 2 and 3 word phrases. Research tells us that children with Down syndrome begin to combine words when they have about between 50-100 word vocabulary (signs and/or spoken words).

What type of speech and language evaluation and treatment are needed?

What can I do to help?

When your child is using single words, there are three paths that we need to follow: oral motor skills/speech, horizontal, and vertical language development. One path is to work on oral motor skills and soundmaking so that your child's speech is understandable. Second is horizontal language development, i.e. you want to help your child develop more concepts and increase vocabulary skills at the 1 word level. You can do that by involving your child in many language experiences and labeling with vocabulary words what is happening at the time. For example, when you walk outside, labeling trees, flowers, birds and clouds, looking at them, listening, smelling, engaging your child's senses in learning the words for what he is seeing. When you are at the playground, provide words for the equipment your child is playing on, and use the words slide, down, on, under, up and down to describe what is happening. Third is vertical development, i.e. helping your child learn to combine words and use 2 word phrases. Children with Down syndrome usually begin to combine words between ages 3-5 years. The best method for helping your child combine words into multi-word phrases is using imitation with expansion and a pacing board. To use imitation with expansion:

1. Repeat what your child says. By repeating the word, you show that you understand him and that he used a correct word.
2. Expand what your child says by one word.

You may present the imitation with expansion many times before your child begins to use two words; just keep at it. This type of activity lends itself well to play and to activities of daily living, for example, your child says sock, you say sock on; your child says ball, you say roll ball or throw ball.

A pacing board is a cueing system that provides a visual and tactile reminder of the number of words your child is able to use in combination. The pacing board may consist of two colored dots on a piece of cardboard, a square of velvet and a square of sandpaper mounted on a board, two colorful stickers mounted on a piece of cardboard—or anything else that your child likes. When you use imitation with expansion, point to the spots on the pacing board as you say each word. For example, point to the first dot when you say

roll and the second dot when you say ball. Place your hand over your child's hand and guide him in point to the dots. Children catch on to using the pacing board very quickly.

Pacing boards are especially helpful for children with Down syndrome because they make use of their visual strengths to remind them to include two words. Once your child is using 2 word phrases consistently, you want to help him learn to use 3 word phrases, daddy throw ball. You can use the same techniques, imitation with expansion and the pacing board with 3 dots. What we find effective is to use a 2 sided pacing board with 2 dots on 1 side (what your child can say) and 3 dots on the flip side (what you are stimulating).

Another way to practice multiword phrases is using children's books with predictable phrases. When you read children's books with your child, choose books that have phrases that are repeated, e.g. all gone, chicken soup with rice, the sky is falling, Where's Spot?. That way, your child can learn the phrase and say it when it comes up in the book. You can also use carrier phrases such as "I see" or "I want", so that your child learns the phrase and just needs to add the one word that will complete the message. You can use a pacing board to teach carrier phrases.

Where can I go for help?

Books, conferences and presentations will help you learn more about how to help your toddler and young child with speech and language. Speech and language services may be available through your local school system, medical centers, community clinics (such as The ARC and Easter Seals), university clinics, and private practitioners. Call Child Find or First Call in your local area to find out about speech and language services available to you. Your local parent support group is an excellent source of information to help in locating professionals in your area. For more information:

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Schermerhorn, W. (2005). *Discovery: Pathways to better speech for children with Down syndrome, ages 2-8*. Video. Bethesda, MD: Woodbine House.

www.ndsccenter.org

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