



# Research Unit for Multilingualism & Cross- Cultural Communication

## Raising Children in more than one Language: Motivating the child to talk

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# Motivating the young child to talk

Sometimes parents report that their children are not motivated to talk. Parents are very perceptive in seeing the reasons for their child's lack of motivation to talk: May that be because he gets all his needs met without having to use language, may it be because older siblings talk for her, or because parents are too apt at understanding. Naturally, a child who is more motivated to talk acquires language faster. A child who hears two languages might be more motivated to use one language than the other for factors in the environment. As parents speaking a Language Other Than English (LOTE) we don't have to sit still and accept this as fate. Let's do something about it!

## Be responsive

- Be sure your child achieves any intent expressed. If she expresses protest, honour it by ceasing the protested action. Provide any object she requests and attend to anything on which she is seeking attention. But don't do it immediately! Read on for strategies.
- Provide acknowledgment of communication. Smile, look at him and comment on any intentional behaviour of your child. Make sure he knows the message was received.
- Provide language for what she is doing. Use simple language to 'translate' her non-verbal intentions into words. If she holds up a cup, say: *It's a CUP!*, stressing the key word and being suitably delighted.
- If you want to establish eye contact, move your head into the gaze of your child. You fade this out as he begins to engage in eye contact more regularly.

## Arrange the environment

- Place a desired object in view, but out of reach. Wait for some form of request, model a useful word for this situation and repeat it several times with a pause in between in order to give her a chance to try and imitate you, e.g. *box?*, wait at least five seconds, *box*, wait at least five seconds; if necessary shake or rattle the object to maintain or regain your child's attention. *Here is the BOX*. Stress the key word and act.
- Place an object of interest to your child in a closed plastic jar so that she has to ask for your help. Wait for her to become frustrated. When she does, don't take it off her and act, but talk, e.g. *Help?*, wait at least five seconds, *Mummy help?*, stretch out your hand and let her give the jar to you, don't take it. Give her time to respond; if necessary tap the jar with your finger and repeat *Mummy help?* Only take the jar off her if she still does not seem to understand; repeat yourself, indicating what you are doing: *Mummy help*.
- Violate the expected order of events, e.g. give your child a shoe before giving him a sock. Proceed as in the examples above.
- Interrupt an ongoing turn taking routine, e.g. while rolling a ball back and forth between yourself and your child, hold on to the ball, wait for his reaction, model an appropriate response, etc.

## Build social routines

- Engage your child in repetitive, predictable games such as 'peek-a-boo' or 'pat-a-cake'. Wait for a sign from her to repeat the routine. Say: again? wait at least five seconds. Enjoy her requests coming more promptly as you repeat the same routine several times a day for a number of days and weeks. Gradually the word will be forming. Again or more are very useful initial words to learn with this routine.
- Vary the game slightly, e.g. if your child has learned 'pat-a-cake', change it to 'bake me a cake as S-L-O-W as you can', with a corresponding change in the pace of the song.
- Design little conversations for routine subjects or activities with your child. Provide slots for him to take a turn. Originally, you fill his slots as well. Always leave time for him to respond before you help, e.g. *Where is Daddy?* Establish eye contact and wait at least five seconds: *Daddy is at WORK!* Stress the key word, wait at least five seconds: *Where is Mummy going?* Establish eye contact, wait at least five seconds: *Mummy is going to WORK TOO!* Stress the key word(s), wait at least five seconds: *Where are YOU going?* Pause, then: *You are going to GRANDMA'S!* As you repeat the routine frequently, you will find that he will first expect your response, then try to fill his slot in the conversation. As he is able to respond in the way you have modelled, you can model a slightly longer response. Routine conversations of this type teach your child about turn-taking in conversation along with a few useful words. You will be delighted with the momentum for language development such routines create!

Of course, you will have to adapt all the above examples to your own language!

Talking is about making people do something, having an effect on the environment, taking turns. The above strategies address all of this. They show your children that you will respond when they use language and that your response is useful for them.

# Strategies for overcoming the child's reluctance to speak the home language

Is your child going through a phase of trying to speak English to you? Reasons for children trying to refuse to speak the home language vary from just testing the waters to finding it too hard. Ask yourself: what might the reasons be and what can I do about them?

**Don't despair and don't give up!** Are *you* consistently using the home language yourself when you talk to your child? If not, your child may think that there is a choice. And when there is a choice, children in Australia tend to choose English. It may also mean that your child simply doesn't hear the LOTE (Language Other Than English) often enough to develop the language skills she needs to converse freely in it. Consistency is the main way out for both dilemmas.

**Be explicit about the language contract** (for more on the *language contract* see the article in *Strategies in the family*). Very young children may not understand the abstract concept of 'language'. But they are able to hear differences between languages at a very early age, probably within the first few weeks of their lives. By about two years of age most children become obsessed with attributing objects to people, as in 'mummy shoe'. This is a perfect time to stop accepting words from either language from the child and to introduce the concept of 'mummy words' and 'daddy words'. You can then instigate the rule to use mummy words with mummy and daddy words with daddy. This draws your child's attention to the differences in the languages, not only for words, but for structures and styles as well. Research has shown that conscious attention improves the rate and depth of learning. The metalinguistic dimension which is introduced with the language contract allows parents and children to talk about the other language (*what does daddy say for 'witch'?*), to translate (*can you tell grandma in daddy words?*) and to support the other language (*if you want mummy to do this you have to use mummy words!*). Of course, it doesn't have to be mum and dad who the languages are associated with, it can be grandma, the child's favourite carer at the child care centre or a friend, or the like.

**Create a need for the child to speak the home language.** Research has shown that monolingual grandparents living in the house have a fantastic influence on the child's motivation and ability to speak the LOTE. With a monolingual speaker English can't be the easy way out. However, this is difficult to engineer for most families. Some parents try and pretend that they don't understand English. I side with those who are reluctant to do that: your child will not believe this for very long. But some kids do accept it as a game. Alternatively, a repair sequence can be introduced, which has much the same effect. It goes like this:

Child:     Want SAFT!

Mother:    You want JUICE? Mummy says JUICE. Can you say JUICE?

Make sure you wait long enough for your child to have a -chance to try. Five to ten seconds is a good guide. Watch your child closely to see if he is still on track. If he tries, GREAT! It doesn't have to be correct. Be overjoyed! Regardless of whether he successfully said the word, tried but couldn't or didn't try at all, repeat the missing word several more times in meaningful sentences while you are getting him the juice. This little repair sequence works in the long run for three reasons: (1) it reminds the child of the language contract, (2) it provides a massive amount of models for a word the child potentially doesn't know or doesn't know well enough to produce, (3) it delays the

gratification without withholding it. Thus you don't punish your child, but you still motivate her to comply in order to reach her goal a bit more quickly.

Getting the child involved in the repair sequence actively is important for later recall: if she has said the word, she is more likely to remember it next time than when she only heard it from you. You can also effect active participation in a repair sequence by giving choices:

Child: [pointing or grunting]  
Father: do you want juice or milk?

If he doesn't comply, follow it through as described above.

Once you know your child can say a word because he has repeated successfully after your model, you can cut back the support you give and only ask *what does mummy say?* Then reward or model or both, as described above.

**Make speaking the home language rewarding for your child** by talking about the benefits, like special celebrations, trips or videos from grandma, child logic, like *what is better one piece of chocolate or two? One language or two?*, or this little gem of a bribe: *if you say it in Italian you can have two biscuits.*

If you don't currently have any problems with language refusal, using the strategies I have suggested proactively will most likely safeguard you against such difficulties in the future.