

Supporting your child's language skills when playing outside



Below are activities and strategies to support your child's communication skills. These activities can target multiple skills, talk to your SLP about what your child is currently working on. Pick 1-2 to start with. If you speak a language other than English at home, you can try these activities in your home language. You will still be helping your child develop their overall language skills!

A few reminders when working on any language skill with your child:

- Get your child's attention before speaking.
- Provide a good language model, just above their language ability. If your child mostly speaks with 1-2 words ("Ball!"), model about 2-4 words ("You want the ball!")
- Use more statements than questions.
- Be patient! Give your child time to contribute: show them you are waiting with anticipation so they know it is their turn.
- Have fun!

Activities and Strategies:

1. Wait for eye contact from your child to encourage an activity to keep going. Any games that build up suspense like chase, tickles, or "Go, Go, Stop" are good. At the moment when the child is expecting you to catch/tickle/pick them up, wait for them to look at you before you follow through with the action. Even if your child is using words, it is important for them to be using eye contact when they make a request such as *Chase me!*
2. Take turns doing actions and make a sentence to describe what you are doing. For example, *I am jumping*. Extend on what the child has said with more details as appropriate, for example you can say, *I am jumping on the rock*.
3. Model the use of basic language concepts when you're outside: *I am up and you are down. We're going to go slow this time! We are going over the bridge*. Repeat, Repeat, Repeat! You may do one concept a week or two a day; move at your child's pace! Here is a list of basic language concepts: *On/Off, Same/Different, Happy/Sad, Full/Empty, Loud/Quiet, Old/Young, Sharp/Dull, Tall/Short, In front of/Behind Up/Down, More/Less, Top/Bottom, Big/Little, All/None, Front/Back, Thick/Thin, Old/New, Long/Short, Hard/Soft, Over/Under, Hot/Cold, Smooth/Rough, High/Low, Always/Never, Heavy/Light, Forward/Backward, Above/Below*.
4. Make obstacle courses. Use different action and concept words to describe what you do to make it through the course. *First, climb over the rock. Then, crawl under the branch. Last, hop in the circle*.
5. Plan a walk or bike journey. Picture your route and the turns you'll take, and landmarks you'll see along the way. Put on "future glasses", which help your child think about the future and places they will be later. What will they do and see there? After, think about what matched their expectations and what did not. Use *First, next, then, last* sequencing words. Draw a map or picture for a visual support.

6. Describe things you see on a walk, adding details to make your child's sentences longer and more interesting. e.g. *That is a big, tall tree. The tree is growing light green buds!* Work on developing their opinions by making a comment. e.g. *Look, that's cool!* or *I don't like those.*
7. Play modified Red Rover to work on listening skills and following directions. Have one person shouting directions, e.g. *Red Rover, Red Rover If you're wearing red, come over. If you have an 'A' in your name, come over. If you can hop on one foot, come over. If you can put a rock under a leaf, come over.*
8. Play follow the leader, and take turns being the leader. Move in a funny way, and the other person will then switch to copy your movement. You can emphasize *First, Next, Now* concepts (e.g. *First I am stomping, now I am skipping!*), or pronouns (e.g. *I am spinning and you are copying, now we are both spinning!*), or you can emphasize past tense verbs (e.g. *I jumped. I ran. I walked backward.*). You could also work on vocabulary development by acting out the differences between words like *walk, stroll, saunter, meander, run, jog, sprint, sneak, tiptoe, creep*, etc.
9. Draw a hopscotch with sidewalk chalk full of different actions and directions to follow. Take turns adding on steps and then playing them out. Remember to talk about what you're doing!
10. Work on categorization as a family game with inspiration in the outdoors, e.g. *Name all the flying things you can, name all the green things you can, flowers, cars etc.* Or you can say three examples from a category and have your child think of the category or group name, e.g. *Bird, airplane, bee. These are all _____.* This supports vocabulary development, word retrieval, and executive functioning skills.
11. Play Eye Spy to work on describing, listening, and making smart guesses. For example, *I spy with my little eye something that is round, black and white, and you kick it.*
12. Go on a Treasure/Scavenger Hunt. Before going out, make a visual checklist (draw or find photos) of things you'll need to search for. Encourage your child to make smart guesses about where they think you might have to look for some of these items. Hunts can be all about a certain category (e.g. looking for hard things in nature, or yellow things, etc.), or you can choose a sound of the day (e.g. *Today we are going to look for things that all start with the /s/ sound.*).
13. Collect pieces of nature (e.g. leaves, rocks, flowers, twigs) and sort them, talking about characteristics, similarities, differences, etc. Organize them in different ways to explore different concepts.
14. Look for stuff outside and think of as many rhyming words as you can with your child. They don't have to all be real words; made up words are fine if they fit into the rhyming pattern (e.g. If you find a twig: *twig, big, mig, sig, lig, jig, pig, wig, zig*). If your child is getting stuck, try providing them with a few examples and then the first sound and have them finish the rhyme (e.g. *Twig, big, m___?*)
15. Say a letter sound (*mmmm*) and have your child try to figure out the letter name ("M"), or vice versa. They can try to make the letter names with their bodies, or create an action to match the sound (e.g. wiggling for a *sssssnake*).

16. Draw a picture story in sidewalk chalk, taking turns to add characters or problems/events and solutions. Taking turns with the development of the story helps build flexible thinking and communication when working together.
17. Paint rocks into characters and have them talk to each other. Or paint vehicles, animals, or whatever your child is interested in and make a narrative or story. Talk about what the objects are doing and make up a story about it using *First, Then, Last*. They can retell their story to another family member later!
18. When playing pretend, use Job Talk. This means you give a title to all participants that helps them visualize more easily what they will do and builds their executive function skills. E.g. *Okay, let's play restaurant now! I'll be the server, and you be the chef. Your sister will be the customer. What do chefs do?* You can also use Job Talk in non-play scenarios to make them more fun, e.g. *Okay now we are all cleaner uppers! or Let's see who can be the best custodian and clean up fastest!*
19. Make a witch's brew of stuff outside in a bucket (e.g. grass, leaves, dirt, rocks, petals, etc.), and talk about what you're all adding, and mixing, etc. and what your potion might do. Think about what magic spells you could do too. How would nice spells or mean spells or funny spells make others feel?
20. Play detective: Infer what an animal or person might be doing and predict what they will do next. To make a smart guess, look with your eyes, listen with your ears, and think about what you know. E.g. *I see that person is holding shopping bags, and I know that the grocery store is nearby. I can make a smart guess that they just went to the store!* You can also try to predict the weather: *I see some grey clouds and I hear some wind. I think it might rain soon.*

Optional websites to explore:

- Basic Concepts: https://www.superduperinc.com/handouts/pdf/52_Teaching_Basic_Concepts.pdf
- Hopscotch: <http://www.housingaforest.com/25-ways-to-play-hopscotch/>
- Pretend Play: <https://www.theempowerededucatoronline.com/2017/06/dramatic-play-outside-ideas.html/>