



# EITI Newsletter

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## INTERVENTION FOR LANGUAGE PROCESSING AND DISCOURSE SKILLS

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*Hang up your jacket, go put your sneakers under the bed and put your backpack on top of your desk.*

*Tell grandma all the things you did at the zoo yesterday.*

The above are two types of requests commonly made of young children. Although simple in appearance, these requests encapsulate most of the receptive and expressive language skills required of children by five years of age. These requests also allow one to detect more subtle language problems which may not have been previously noticed. There are many children who have clear speech and can speak in sentences, however, their language problems are only visible when higher level language demands are placed on them, such as in following multi-step directions, listening to lengthier information or having to formulate or produce a narration of experienced events.

### **LANGUAGE PROCESSING**

The first request requires a child to attend to auditory information, understand the grammar, vocabulary and concepts, follow a sequence of requests in order and retain all requests in memory long enough to carry out what was asked.

The most important indication that a child is having difficulty in understanding such directions is the child's failure to comply with requests made. This may often be misinterpreted as disobedience. Problems in understanding language may be present if the child tunes out the speaker, asks for repetitions, retrieves incorrect objects, performs steps out of order, repeats direction to self, delays in carrying out direction and/or forgets some steps. Such difficulties in receptive language skills will hinder not only the performance of daily tasks

within the home but also the ability to learn and perform at school. There are, however, several techniques that can minimize or eliminate receptive language difficulties in children. The following techniques are used by speech-language pathologists during therapy. Some of these techniques can be adapted for home or school use as long as parents or teachers use them in an appropriate context where the child is engaged in enjoyable activities and is not pressured. Any work on communication requires a desire to communicate, therefore, when teaching children skills in this area it is essential that they be willing participants.

### **Increase Listening Skills**

Telling a child to listen is not sufficient. Children need to become active listeners so that they themselves are capable of attending to information. This can be taught to young children by having the child listen to a specific word when being read a familiar story. Each time the child hears that word, he/she has to raise his/her hand or give some other sign that he/she heard the word. Also, when distracted by external noises or other interests, tell the child to tell it (the noise or other competing interest) to "stop bothering me, you have to wait until I'm finished". This will help teach self-monitoring. Another way to increase listening skills is to play a game in which the child tries to guess the object or animal that has made a specific noise. This game can be incorporated into daily routines by calling children's attention to a noise (i.e. wind, rain, cat) and asking them to identify its source.

### **Analyze Sounds in Words**

The ability to recognize whether two words rhyme or what sound a word begins with not only aids children in strengthening receptive language skills but it has also been found to be predictive of future reading skills. Rhyming can be taught via Mother Goose or other rhyming books as well as via songs or finger play with words that rhyme. Identifying the first sound in words can be taught via various

creative games. These again can be incorporated into daily activities. For instance, while traveling in the car or bus, the child can be asked to look out for things that begin with the sound “b” (bus, boy, bike, bird, etc.).

### ***Sequence Events***

Practical ways to teach sequencing of events is by engaging the child in activities which require following a set order. There are numerous daily activities which can be utilized to train sequencing. Such activities can involve tasks such as making a sandwich or getting dressed. While the child is involved in these activities, one can point out what happens first and next and so forth. The adult can initially assist the child in following the steps. As the child gets more used to the activity, less assistance is needed.

### ***Increase Memory Skills***

One of the best ways to assist a child in remembering information is by asking the child to repeat the direction given before carrying it out. The direction does not have to be repeated word for word, rather it can be provided in telegraphic form. For instance, to follow the direction provided at the beginning, the adult can model the essential information to be repeated, “hang up jacket, sneakers under bed, backpack on desk”. One other helpful way to assist in recalling information is to teach the child to rely on visual skills to remember. Using the same example, the child can be told to close his/her eyes and think of his/her room while being given the direction. He/she can think of himself hanging up the jacket, then kneeling next to the bed to put away the sneakers and finally placing the backpack on the desk.

### ***Develop Vocabulary***

A child may be able to sequence and recall directions. If he/she does not understand certain words, however, he/she will not be able to carry out the direction. Opportunities for teaching vocabulary and concepts (size, location, opposites, etc.) arise in daily situations. One of the best ways of doing this is by attending to what a child is interested in at any given moment and commenting on it. If a child is enjoying playing with a puppy, one can comment on the puppy’s soft and long hair or pointy ears. One can also ask the child questions such as, “Do you like big dogs or small dogs?”.

### ***Increase Understanding of Grammar***

Understanding the order of words in a sentence also contributes to being able to understand the message. For instance, some children may ignore

certain essential words in sentences (i.e. “not” – Get the pants that are not dirty). A fun way to work on such skills is by playing “Simon Says”. The child can be given directions which repeatedly contain “not” – Simon says touch the toy that is not in the box.

### ***Develop Problem Solving Abilities***

Being able to understand the cause of a problem, reason for certain actions and possible solutions is essential to the child’s understanding of his/her world. A child who has difficulties in any of these areas needs explicit explanations and models of how to problem solve. One way to address this is to explain cause and effect of daily events (i.e. the baby is crying because she is hungry; if you break your toy you won’t be able to play with it anymore). Another way to increase this awareness is by reading or telling stories to a child. During the course of story telling there are numerous opportunities to ask “why”, “how” and “what will happen if” questions. If the child is not able to respond to such questions, the adult can respond for him/her. When the same book is read multiple times, the child will eventually begin to be able to respond himself.

### ***Modify One’s Language***

Speaking at a slower rate is often helpful in increasing a child’s ability to understand a message. Simplifying or paraphrasing a message can also help in understanding. Finally, pausing more frequently during speaking and providing more time for the child to respond will also contribute to increased understanding.

### ***Increase Awareness***

Obtaining the child’s attention and eye gaze prior to giving a direction is important to ensure the child’s awareness of an incoming message. Telling the child that you are about to tell him/her something important will also help him/her to increase attention and thus facilitate understanding. After providing a direction it is also helpful to ask the child what he/she was told, this will determine if his/her understanding was accurate. If the child did not fully understand, the message can be repeated or simplified, thereby avoiding failure of what he/she was told to do.

### ***Increase Understanding of Nonverbal Communication***

For most children understanding another person’s facial expression, tone of voice or indirect requests is a natural skill. However, some children will have difficulty in understanding these unspoken rules of communicating and will thus need explicit training. In such cases, increasing

children's awareness of such rules can be done by directly telling them what one means when one shows a certain expression or speaks with a stern versus a soothing voice. Taking on roles for different characters during play is another way to teach them this skill.

### **DISCOURSE SKILLS**

As important as having a child understand what he/she hears, is being able to express his/her thoughts, needs, and wants. In order to accomplish the second request, *Tell grandma all the things you did at the zoo today*, the child needs to be able to organize his/her thoughts in a cohesive manner by expressing these thoughts in a grammatically appropriate form and including appropriate details that pertain to the event.

There are several ways to help children who have expressive language difficulties.

#### **Increase Word Retrieval**

Some children have trouble finding the word they need. They experience word retrieval difficulties, which are often characterized by the use of fillers (eg. um, uh), pauses, and circumlocutions (eg. talking around words). In this situation, phonemic cueing (stating the initial sound of the word the child is having difficulty generating) is a strategy that aids in the child's ability to recall words. Encouraging a child to describe the word he/she is having difficulty generating, is a useful strategy as well. For example, playing an "I Spy" game is effective for targeting a child's ability to describe something they see.

#### **Increase Details**

Many children have difficulty recalling specific details that occurred during their day, in movies, television shows, or stories. This is often observed when children use vague and non-specific language (eg. that thing, this, that, right here/there). Asking the child various wh-questions (eg. who, what, where, when, why) regarding specific events can aid in their ability to provide additional pertinent information.

#### **Improve Sequencing Skills**

In order to verbally sequence events, children have to recall and organize their recollections of the events that occurred. After engaging in daily activities such as making cereal/sandwich, taking a bath, taking a trip to the grocery store/park, or making arts and crafts, children benefit from visual support (illustrations) to aid in their recall and help them express the appropriate sequence of events. Family photographs can help them review what they did.

### **Increasing Sentence Length and Complexity**

Many times, children will provide short, simple sentences, which do not include conjunctions, or clauses to link information together. In this situation, it is best to expand on the children's utterances by providing them with appropriate grammar, increased sentence length, conjunctions and clauses. For example, if you ask a child *Tell me what you did at the zoo today*, he/she might reply, "I saw a tiger." At this time, expanding, or elaborating on the child's utterance would encourage him/her to lengthen his/her description as well. For example, a communicative partner may state, "Oh, you saw a big, scary tiger that was eating grass."

### **Repair Strategies**

At times, when children are expressing themselves, it is difficult to comprehend all of what they are saying. Communicative breakdown occurs when either conversational partner is unable to comprehend what the other is stating. It is important to teach children how to repair their failures in order to make themselves understood. It is important to teach children how to repair their breakdowns during conversation. An adult's asking various wh-questions (eg. who, what, where, when, why) can help children explain what they mean.

While working on the above techniques one should always remember to praise the child for any accomplishments. Increasing an area of weakness is always effortful, therefore encouragement and motivation are essential components to obtaining maximum results. Equally important is encouraging the development of areas of strength. Difficulties and intensive work in one area will more likely be accepted if the child can succeed and feel confident in another area. It is also important to remember to maintain the child's interest and be receptive to his/her needs and interests. Consideration of all these areas will enable children with language difficulties to better understand as well as better express themselves in their daily lives. ■