

# LANGUAGE TOOLKIT

## D/HH INFANT & TODDLER STRATEGIES

“The most important factor in children's language development is the quality and quantity of the language they hear from their caregivers and in their environments.”

- Catherine Snow, Harvard Graduate School of Education Professor and Researcher

### Acknowledgment and Disclaimer:

This toolkit was originally developed by Rebecca Tucker with Parent Infant Network for Educational Services (PINES) Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) in Georgia. It is shared here with permission and in partnership with Illinois EHDI and Illinois Hands & Voices.



Illinois EHDI and Illinois Hands & Voices have adapted and translated this toolkit into multiple languages to increase accessibility for families and professionals. The translated versions are shared with the permission of the original author.

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# START STRONG: CONNECT



**The relationship you have with your child shapes the structure and function of their brain” – Dr. Dan Siegel**

Building a strong relationship with your child begins early, laying the foundation for social, emotional, and learning skills.

Language development begins at birth.

## RESEARCH SHOWS...

Infants and toddlers thrive on close relationships with their caregivers. Through these experiences, they develop positive self-esteem and trust in others.



## TRY THIS:

- Make eye contact with your child
- Use touch: hug your baby, place your hand on their back, tap their shoulder
- Hold and talk to your baby face to face
- Smile at your child
- Play with your child, enjoy your child
- Attune to your child’s signals
  - Be aware of small communication they are making and respond to it.
- Look at what your child is looking at; appreciate what they appreciate

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## SHARE THE FOCUS: JOINT ATTENTION



“ “  
Providing language input that is directly relevant to the child’s current focus of attention has an effect on language acquisition.

Joint attention is when a caregiver and child have a shared focus on the same object or activity. This often looks like a caregiver and child looking at each other, then both shifting to look at the same thing.

Follow your child’s lead and engage in their interests.

### RESEARCH SHOWS...

Following a child’s interests and creating moments of connection strengthens your bond with your child, social skills, and emotional awareness.



### TRY THIS:

- Following your child's lead and engage in their interests
- Give something to draw attention to one spot both of you can look at
- Holding your baby so they face out from you makes it easier for them to see what you see
  - Try this when reading or walking around the house
- Label feelings
  - “You seem upset”
  - “I feel so excited!”
- Use pointing; point to objects to direct child’s attention
- **Sequential interaction:** Be sure the child is looking at you and then start a conversation about a toy; if the child breaks eye contact, pause until the child looks at you again.
- All of this is very important for **theory of mind:** understanding of others' thoughts and emotions

# EXPOSE RICH VOCABULARY



**“Children need to be exposed to a wide range of words and their meanings to build a strong foundation for literacy.”**

**-Susan Neuman, Professor at New York University**

Use big words with little kids!

Expose your child to a variety of rich descriptions and sophisticated words. Don't limit yourself to using only simple words—use a variety of words. Embrace your child's ability to understand and learn from rich, varied language.

## RESEARCH SHOWS...

By exposing your child to a diverse vocabulary, you expand their ability to think critically and make connects. It expands vocabulary and primes their brain for reading.



## TRY THIS:

- Use big words, vivid descriptions, and mental state language.
- Talk about yours/ your child's thoughts, emotions, and desires.

- Use “Tier 2” words: words we may not use every day but add extra meaning. For example, “convertible” is more precise than “car”.
- As you read a familiar book with your child, think of how you can add tier 2 words to expand on what is in the book.

Common words	Tier 2 words
Eat	Devour, Chomp, Munch, Nibble, Chew
Big	Enormous, Gigantic, Giant, Immense, Massive, Epic, Tremendous
Happy	Joyful, Carefree, Content, Cheerful, Merry, Delighted
Fast	Quick, Speedy, Zippy

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# EXPRESS NATURALLY AND INTENTIONALLY

There is a strong influence of the home linguistic environment on development in young children who are deaf. (Szagun and Schramm, 2019)“

Provide your child with meaningful, real-world language exposure.

Your baby needs to hear or see 20,000 – 30,000 of loving words/signs every day.

Natural expressions— Talk like you normally talk and use routines and common objects/ events for authentic/ real interactions.

## RESEARCH SHOWS...

A greater quantity of parent talk is correlated to better vocabulary outcomes. Talking and signing to your child gives them a better exposure to language.



## TRY THIS:

- Intentionally expose your child to language about what is happening around them. **Self-Talk** is being a storyteller about what you are doing.
- Don't "be a label maker" and just express one- word nouns or name colors when communicating with your child.
- Model full sentences, thoughts, and concepts
- Go to the grocery store with your baby and describe the fruits and vegetables. Sign/Talk about the shape, color, and taste of each.
- Take a walk with your baby. Use the things you see on your walk to explain what baby sees and the purpose of those things
  - For example: if you see a stop sign, point it out, explain what it is and what it does/ what it means
- Explain each step to your baby as you make coffee, fold clothes, or load the dishwasher.
- What is something you do every day with your baby? Even if it is simple or mundane, how could you use this time to talk with your baby?

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# COMMUNICATE WITH EXPRESSION



"Communicating with expression offers an invitation to learn and engage—the way you say something matters, as children feel language before they understand it.."

Keep it fun—sing, rhyme, read, and use expressive movements to engage them in learning!

Use facial expressions, vary the way you say and sign things, and slow down your words. This can make language more noticeable and memorable for your child.

**Parentese:** a natural way caregivers talk to babies using a warm, sing-song voice with clear, slow speech to grab their attention and help them learn language.

## RESEARCH SHOWS...

Research shows that how parents talk to their babies plays a crucial role in language development. Parentese—speech with a higher pitch, exaggerated intonation, and slower tempo—helps babies engage socially and develop stronger language skills.

## TRY THIS:

- **Acoustic highlighting:** emphasizing new words. In speech, this means adding extra stress, slowing down, or using a sing-song tone for the new word; in signing, it involves increased facial expression or movement emphasis.
- Parentese, pitch, volume, facial expressions, interesting, surprising, acoustic highlighting
- Emphasizing new words (say/ sign slowly, carefully, loudly/ largely)
- Model good speech/ signs (speak clearly, use correct speech sounds)
- Attach movement to specific sounds/ signs
- Raising eyebrows or squinting eyes for questions
- Use facial expressions to match what you are saying
- Sign in slower tempo (sign HAPPY slowly)
- Repeat words (sign HAPPY multiple times in a row; say the same word multiple times)
- Exaggerate movements (sign HAPPY big and with wide eyes)

# PROMPT & PULL



By prompting children to engage in conversations, you strengthen both communication and your bond through fun, interactive moments.

The concept of "prompt and pull language" emphasizes creating intentional opportunities for children to engage in communication by setting up scenarios that encourage them to express themselves.

Give your baby a reason to communicate.

## RESEARCH SHOWS...

Parents can draw out their child's language skills while fostering independence, confidence, and meaningful interaction. These practices build language in natural, engaging contexts.

## TRY THIS:

- **Linguistic sabotage:** set up situations that make your child ask for help
  - Example: Your child brings you a snack bag and hands it to you. You may know they want you to open it but instead you say "For me to eat? Thank you!" The goal is for them to say "No! Open it please!"
- Put a toy just outside baby's reach or offer a bottle just beyond baby's lips. This prompts baby to respond with a sound, movement, sign, or word.
- Cues
  - "Tell me"
  - Pause for a response
- Offer choices
- Closure
  - Start a familiar phrase, song, or story and pauses for the child to finish it.
  - Play Peek-A-Boo: Hide your face behind a blanket and say, "Peek-A" \_\_\_\_\_. When baby says, "Boo!", drop the blanket to show your excited face.

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## TAKE TURNS / BACK & FORTH



**“Serve and return interactions—responsive, back-and-forth exchanges between a child and adults—reinforce brain circuits that are at the core of our early emotional well-being and social skills.” -Developing Child, Harvard**

Back and forth interactions strengthen language development by creating a responsive and supportive environment. Children learn to listen, understand, respond, and communicate through taking turns in conversation and activities.

Think of it like a game of tennis! If your child serves the ball, bounce it back. If you serve the ball, expect your child to respond.

### RESEARCH SHOWS...

Child language outcomes were found to be get better when caregivers engaged their toddlers in frequent conversational turns.



### TRY THIS:

- Back and forth interactions:
  - Shared activities (If your toddler pushes a car towards you, push it back, encourage them to keep it going)
  - Smile back at your child; smile at them and wait for them to smile back
- Keeping it going
  - Dialogue (If your child makes a noise or says something to you, respond to them)
  - Imitate a sound your child makes or something they sign
  - Wait for a response from your child (Each time the swing comes toward you, hold the swing just a second and talk/sign with your baby. Wait for baby to reply, and then let the swing go)
  - Ask your child questions
  - Repeat what your child says/sings to let him know you heard/saw him.
- Say phrases like "My turn" and "Your turn"

# EXPAND & ADD



**A mother's ability to respond to her deaf infant was a powerful predictor of the child's ability to develop attentiveness, social skills and language.<sup>11</sup>**

Build onto child communication attempts. Expansion is making what your child says/signs more complex or complete. Expanding on your child's communication attempts means meeting the child where they are and adding more.

**Linguistic mapping**, providing the words your child needs to describe things they are interested in but can't yet express.

**Novel mapping**, connecting unfamiliar words to new objects or actions

## RESEARCH SHOWS...

helps foster language growth and strengthen social connection helping your child link language to their environment and encouraging deeper understanding.



## TRY THIS:

- If your child signs/ says one word, you respond with that word plus one more.
  - Ex: "dog!" you say "big dog!"
  - Baby signs "dog" and you reply, "Yes! That is our dog, June. She is running so fast!"
- Use toys for expansion
  - If your baby says/signs "choo-choo" or "train", you can reply, "You are right! That is a choo-choo train. The train rides on tracks."
- Mealtime is a great time for this
  - Ex: Baby says "mmm" or signs "more" when eating a banana. You could respond with, "You ate all the banana on your plate and it looks like you want more. Bananas are delicious. Let me get you some more."

# READ



**“Reading is the gateway for children that makes all other learning possible.”**  
 – Barack Obama

Reading with your child from a young age builds literacy foundations that last a life time.

Read to your child. Read with your child.  
 Read around your child.

## RESEARCH SHOWS...

Joint book reading is linked to many skills in later childhood- vocabulary growth, learning the meaning of new words, literacy, and more.



## TRY THIS:

- Elaborate on the text
  - Add explanations to what you are reading, question your child about what you read.
- Shift between looking at the book and making eye contact with your child
- Point to the pictures in a book and talk about what you see
- Use pictures in a book to talk about experiences you have had
- Use different character voices and different ways of signing to represent conversations, personality, etc
  - Be dramatic, play with signs and words, use exaggerated facial expressions and show emotions that match the story
- Let your child watch you reading books to yourself for enjoyment
- Have your child help by turning the pages
- Adjust sign space- sign regularly, sign on the pages, sign on your child
- Role shift, big and exaggerated signs to show a loud character or exclamation point, different pitch tone or intensity
- Read everyday



# SHARE JOY



**"The greatest legacy we can leave our children is happy memories." – Og Mandino**

Allow your child time to explore independently while also savoring the moments of joy and connection with them.

Do not feel pressure to be their constant language teacher.

## RESEARCH SHOWS...

When parents feel empowered rather than pressured, child's language development flourishes. Creating a low-stress, engaging environment allows children to communicate spontaneously, fostering confidence and stronger language skills.

## TRY THIS:

- Let the information settle, give your child time to take in the information
- Get involved- recognize all your child's success, big and small
- It is okay to take a step back and take space to enjoy parenthood
- Be confident in your skills to create a language-rich environment
- Enjoy your child

Focus on quality over quantity

