

## **Toy Talk Strategies: An Instructional Resource**

Pamela A. Hadley & Matthew Rispoli, University of Illinois

### **Citation:**

Hadley, P.A., & Rispoli, M. (2015). *Toy talk strategies: An instructional resource*. Retrieved from <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/>

### **Description of Toy Talk**

To facilitate language development, clinicians often encourage parents and teachers to follow the child's attentional lead and to model vocabulary and basic sentence structure using comments or descriptive talk<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup>. Language modeling strategies are intended to help children connect words in the language input to corresponding objects, actions, and events in the world. Common strategies include responsive labeling, self-talk, and parallel talk.

- responsive labeling (e.g., *That's a monkey.*)
- self-talk (i.e., talk about one's own actions; *I'm rocking the baby.*)
- parallel talk (e.g., talk about child's action; *You're feeding the baby.*)

Although these strategies have been shown to increase toddler's vocabulary size and sentence length, these strategies may limit the sentence subjects children hear in the input (e.g., *it, that, I, you*). To facilitate the emergence of diverse sentence combinations, we developed toy talk as a language modeling strategy<sup>6</sup>. Toy talk consists of two strategies: (a) *talk about the toys* the child is playing with, including the states, actions, and properties of the toys, and (b) *give the object its name*. When combined, toy talk is expected to increase the frequency and diversity of third person lexical noun phrases (NP) as sentence subjects in adult input to young children.

- toy talk (e.g., *The cow fits. The baby is drinking.*)

### **Potential Benefits of Toy Talk**

1. The presence of third person lexical NP subjects in the adult input is hypothesized to make the subject position easier for children to identify.
  - ✓ Lexical NP subjects (e.g., *the pig; your tower*) are lower in frequency compared to pronominal subjects (e.g., *it, that, you*). Therefore, transitional probabilities between lexical NP subjects. Therefore, transitional probabilities between lexical NP subjects and the following words in the predicate will be lower (e.g., *horse* → *is* < *this* → *is*). This is predicted to make the constituent boundary between the subject and the predicate easier to identify<sup>7,8</sup>.
  - ✓ As the abstract representation for the subject-predicate relation is strengthened, children should be better able to use this representation to produce novel sentences.
2. The presence of lexical NP subjects in the adult input is also hypothesized to make tense and agreement morphemes easier for children to identify because the third person singular cell of the English verb paradigm is the most consistently and distinctively marked<sup>9</sup>.
  - ✓ Sentences with longer, low-frequency lexical NP subjects (e.g., *the pig; your tower*) are more likely to have full (uncontracted) copula and auxiliary forms than those with high-frequency pronominal subjects<sup>10</sup>.
  - ✓ Declarative sentences with full copula and auxiliary forms (e.g., *the pig is; your tower is*)

may facilitate learning these words as distinct constituents rather than as rote (e.g., *it's*, *that's*, *you're*).

3. Increased use of lexical NP subjects in adult input may also support children's development of a more literate, oral language style that will, in turn, provide a stronger foundation for reading readiness and school success<sup>11</sup>.

### **Recommendations for Toy Talk Instruction**

We introduce parents to toy talk in the context of a broader adult education program and individualized parent coaching. We build toy talk on the foundation of general responsive interaction strategies<sup>3</sup>, presenting toy talk as one of many language modeling strategies. We encourage parents to interpret and expand their children's communication attempts, as appropriate, and to use toy talk sentences approximately *once or twice per minute*.

### **For Further Information**

Hadley, P. (2014). Approaching early grammatical intervention from a sentence-focused framework. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 45, 110-116.

Hadley, P., & Walsh, K. (2014). Toy talk: Simple strategies to create richer grammatical input. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 45, 159-172.

Visit the Applied Psycholinguistics Lab website for research program updates and other clinical resources: <http://shs.illinois.edu/Research/Labs/AppliedPsycholinguistics/Publications.aspx>

Email: [phadley@illinois.edu](mailto:phadley@illinois.edu)

### **References**

<sup>1</sup>Bunce, B. (1995). *Building a language-focused curriculum for the preschool classroom, Volume II: A planning guide*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing, Inc.

<sup>2</sup>Girolametto, L., Pearce, P., & Weitzman, E. (1996). Interactive focused stimulation for toddlers with expressive vocabulary delays. *Journal of Speech and Hearing Research*, 39, 1274-1283.

<sup>3</sup>Girolametto, L., & Weitzman, E. (2006). It Takes Two to Talk- The Hanen Program for Parents: Early language intervention through caregiver training. In R. McCauley & M. Fey (Eds.), *Treatment of language disorders in children* (pp. 77-104). Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.

<sup>4</sup>Justice, L., Mashburn, A., Pence, K., & Wiggins, A. (2008). Experimental evaluation of a preschool language curriculum: Influence on children's expressive language skills. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 51, 983-1001.

<sup>5</sup>Robertson, S., & Ellis Weismer, S. (1999). Effects of treatment on linguistic and social skills in toddlers with delayed language development. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 42, 1234-1248.

<sup>6</sup>Hadley, P., & Walsh, K. (2014). Toy talk: Simple strategies to create richer grammatical input. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 45, 159-172.

<sup>7</sup>Gómez, R. L. (2002). Variability and detection of invariant structure. *Psychological Science*, 13, 431-436.

<sup>8</sup>Thompson, S., & Newport, E. (2007). Statistical learning of syntax: The role of transitional probability. *Language Learning and Development*, 3, 1-42.

<sup>9</sup>Rispoli, M., Hadley, P., & Holt, J. (2012). Sequence and system in the acquisition of tense and agreement. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 55, 1007-1021.

<sup>10</sup>Frank, A.F., & Jaeger, T.F. (2008). Speaking rationally: Uniform information density as an optimal strategy for language production. In *CogSci*. Washington D.C.: CogSci.

<sup>11</sup>Snow, C., Burns, S., & Griffin, P. (1998). *Preventing reading difficulties in young children*. Washington, DC: National Academy Press.

This instructional resource was developed as part of a grant (NICHD R21 HD071316) awarded to Pamela A. Hadley (PI), Matthew Rispoli, and Janet K. Holt. **Disclaimer:** The contents do not represent the views of the NIH or the United States Government.

# Toy Talk Strategies

## Strategy 1: Talk about the toys

You can use *toy talk* in all kinds of play activities. Allow your child to choose the play activity. Then add language by commenting on the toy that your child finds interesting.

### 1) Pretend play

Pretend play is often based on familiar experiences. Include your child's dolls or favorite stuffed animals when you feed them, give them a bath or put them to bed. You can talk about the toy's features, ask what the toy needs, or describe the toy's actions.

Child: Doggie.

Parent: Your doggie looks thirsty.

Maybe she needs a drink.

Child: Teddy.

Parent: Teddy is cold. Does he want a blanket?



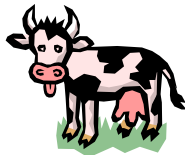
### 2) Construction play

Construction play refers to building, stacking, and assembling activities. Watch and join in your child's play by describing or commenting on objects of interest. For example, talk about a puzzle piece your child chooses.

Child: Go there?

Parent: Does the cow go there?

Yes, the cow goes in.



### 3) Games and Routines

Make games and routines more fun by including your child's favorite toys. You can use *toy talk* to add comments about the toys at a specific point in your game or routine.

Child: Ball!

Parent: Here comes the ball.

The ball is rolling (or bouncing)!



### 4) Books

You can describe the pictures in books even when a book doesn't tell a story. *Toy talk* is more than just labeling pictures. When you use *toy talk*, you describe something about the picture....what you do with the object, how it feels, and so on.



Child: (points to baby's hat, then looks at you)

Parent: The baby's hat feels rough.  
He likes his new hat.

## Strategy 2: Give the toy its name

Naming gives your child an opportunity to use more specific words for things he wants to talk about.

Use the names of toys or objects when you talk about them.

Child: It's falling.

Parent: Yes, your *tower* is falling.



You can also name your child's favorite stuffed animals or dolls. As your child introduces his new toy dog to the family, you can describe how the dog feels and what the dog does.



Child: He's soft.

Parent: *Lucky* is so soft.  
*Lucky* barks too.

Try including your child's favorite dolls and stuffed animals in your play. This will provide you with opportunities to talk about what "Baby Nina or Poohbear" likes to eat for breakfast. You can also give Nina or Pooh a turn in your child's favorite games/routines.

# Using Toy Talk Strategies in Everyday Activities

*Toy talk* isn't just for playing with toys. You can apply these strategies during mealtime, bath time, and household chores. Descriptive talk can make common experiences more interesting and create new learning opportunities for your child.

## Mealtime

Talk about how foods taste, look, and feel using descriptive words like *sweet*, *salty*, *yummy*, *squishy*, *cold*, and *hot*.

Your rice is sticky.

Mmm. That cereal looks yummy!



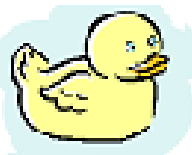
## Bath time

Bath time is a great time to play. You can describe how the water feels and what you do with soap. You can also bring a plastic toy like a rubber duck into the tub and let your child help clean it.

The soap makes bubbles in the bath.

Is the water warm?

The duck's face is dirty.



## Cooking

You can talk about cooking in your real kitchen or when your child is pretending to cook. The kitchen is full of items to name and talk about.

The pizza is cooking / is hot / tastes good.

Oh no, the milk spilled.



## Dressing

When dressing your child, you can talk about your child's clothes.

What comes off first? Your shoe comes off first.

Your arm goes through the sleeve. Here it comes!



In other words, you can use toy talk strategies as part of a responsive interaction style (Pepper & Weitzman, 2004; Manolson, Ward, & Dodington, 2007) as you observe what events and objects your child is interested in, comment and ask questions about the objects, and provide more specific names for the objects. Remember to talk about the objects and what they do, and over time you'll be using toy talk strategies all day long.

## References:

- Manolson, A., Ward, B., & Dodington, N. (2007). *You make the difference in helping your child learn*. Toronto, Ontario: The Hanen Centre.
- Pepper, J., & Weitzman, E. (2004). *It takes two to talk*. Toronto, Ontario: The Hanen Centre.

For more information, contact [phadley@illinois.edu](mailto:phadley@illinois.edu)  
Pamela Hadley, Ph.D.  
Applied Psycholinguistics Laboratory  
Speech and Hearing Science  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign



Development supported by NICHD R21 HD071316 awarded to Pamela A. Hadley (PI), Matthew Rispoli, and Janet K. Holt.  
**Disclaimer:** The contents do not represent the views of the NIH or the United States Government.