



Helping Children Learn English as a Second Language

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Nowadays it's quite common for people to speak more than one language. Here in Toronto, there are many families who speak a language other than English at home with their children. These children's first language is the one they speak at home, and they then learn English as their second language.

Parents often ask how they can help their child learn English as a second language. The answer is that the types of parent-child interactions that help children learn their first language help them learn their second language as well. A group of American researchers recently wrote an article reviewing what we know about supporting children's language development and how this applies to children who are learning a second language [1]. We've created some tips on promoting children's second language learning based on their suggestions.

Tip #1: Children learn best during interactions with responsive caregivers

Children learn language as they interact and play with the important people in their lives on a daily basis. When caregivers are responsive during these interactions, children feel connected to them and are motivated to keep interacting. Being responsive means letting the child start and lead the conversation and then responding with interest and enthusiasm to whatever the child communicates (with or without words). Research has shown that children who spend more time in responsive interactions with their parents tend to have bigger vocabularies [1].

- **How you can help:** Carefully observe what catches your child's attention at the moment, wait for your child to send you a message, and listen carefully to what your child is trying to tell you. Then respond with interest, talking about what he has communicated. This gives your child opportunities to hear and learn the words that express his interests.

Tip #2: Children learn words for things that interest them

We all learn more when we are interested in something. This also applies to learning a first or second language. Studies have shown that children are more likely to learn the names of objects when their parents follow their lead and create responsive interactions based on their child's interests, as opposed to when their parents redirect their child's attention to other things [1].

- **How you can help:** When you see that your child is interested in something, turn it into a conversation by talking about it. When you include your child's interests in this way, he will likely pay attention to what you are saying and he is more likely to learn new words.

Tip #3: Children learn what they hear most often

In order to learn language, children need to hear a lot of language. And for children learning more than one language, this means that they need a lot of exposure to *both* of their languages.

- **How you can help:** By adding language to your everyday activities and experiences, you naturally increase the amount of language your child hears. Any activity is an opportunity for language learning – you can talk about what foods you both like to eat as you prepare snacks, talk about the characters and their actions when you share books together, and think of the new words your child can learn from a visit to the doctor's office (stethoscope, thermometer, scale). But remember Tip #1 – you need to follow your child's lead so that you don't take over the conversation. Your goal is to be a responsive communication partner – not the boss of the conversation!

Parents often wonder if they should stop speaking their home language to their child when he starts attending an English daycare or school. There are a couple of reasons why this might not be a good idea. First of all, parents should speak to their child in a language they are 100% comfortable with. If parents aren't fully fluent in a language, they won't provide the best language input. Also, interactions with the child may suffer as it's difficult to be responsive when trying to speak a language with which you are not comfortable. Finally, research has shown that a child is at risk of losing his home language unless he continues to hear it spoken to him and around him [2]. Learning a second language doesn't mean abandoning the first language. It means providing enough exposure to both languages.

Tip #4: Flashcards are not the answer!

Children learn words best during meaningful activities in everyday life. Think about the way your child learned his first language – it was through playing and talking with you throughout the day. The same applies to his second language. Trying to teach words (for example, by looking at flashcards) is never very fun or motivating for children. And it's more likely your child will remember new words when he hears them during meaningful activities.

- **How you can help:** Introduce new words when you play and interact with your child. Use each daily activity as an opportunity to expose your child to new words. Examples of daily activities include playing, looking at books together, and routines like meals, bath time and getting dressed.

Tip #5: Variety is key

When it comes to learning language, children need variety, including:

- a variety of words - not just common words they might hear every day, but also more sophisticated, rare words. When parents use a wide variety of words, their children tend to develop better communication skills later on [3].
 - a variety of communication partners – hearing a language from a variety of different speakers helps with language development.
 - a variety of examples – hearing a word once isn’t enough to build a child’s vocabulary. Children need to hear a word several times in several different sentences before they start to understand its meaning.
- **How you can help:** Emphasize a variety of words for your child, including words that he might not hear during everyday conversation. For example, during bath time you could introduce words like “temperature” and “lather”. While making a snack together, you could say “slice” and “prepare”. And be sure to use new words in different situations so your child broadens his understanding of what the word means. For example, you could talk about the temperature of the water in the bath and also the oven temperature. The more opportunities your child has to hear new words, the more likely it is that he will add those words to his vocabulary. There are more ideas about helping children learn new words in our article [“Build Your Child’s Vocabulary”](#).

Tip #6: Vocabulary and grammar go hand-in-hand

You might think that the easiest way to teach a child a new word is to say the word on its own. But hearing a word in a sentence is actually more helpful, as the sentence gives the child clues about the word’s meaning. For example, if the child just hears “freezer” while you point to the freezer, the child doesn’t know if the word refers to the door of the freezer, the freezer itself or the food inside. But if he hears: “Let’s put the meat in the freezer. This will make the meat really cold so it will stay fresh. Then we can eat it next week when we want hamburgers again,” this tells him that “freezer” is the part of the refrigerator that is really cold. It also tells him that “freezer” is a noun (the name of a thing) because there is already a verb in the sentence (“put”).

- **How you can help:** Using short, grammatical sentences when you speak to a child will help build his language skills. Avoid using words on their own or using sentences that don’t have

the little grammatical sounds and syllables that make a sentence complete. (For example, say “I’m eating my cracker” rather than “Mommy eat cracker”.)

You have all the tools you need to build your child’s second language. So follow your child’s lead and have fun! You will build your child’s second language when you have enjoyable conversations during everyday activities which include rich vocabulary and grammatical sentences.

For more information about bilingual development, please see our other articles on this topic:

- [Bilingualism in Young Children: Separating Fact from Fiction](#)
- [Can children with language impairments learn two languages?](#)

References

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3. Rowe, M. (2012). A Longitudinal Investigation of the Role of Quantity and Quality of Child-Directed Speech in Vocabulary Development. *Child Development*: 83(5), 1762-1774.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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