



## Helping Children Move Beyond Simple Sentences

Once children have learned to combine words, they may still be figuring out the finer points of language (ending on words such as “books”, “walked”, smaller words in sentences such as “is”, “the”, “a”, irregular verb tenses “ran”, “ate” and plurals “mice”, “feet”). As your child starts to figure out the rules, he may overuse them at first (“He ranned” instead of “he ran”, “mouses” instead of “mice”). To help your child learn to talk in complete sentences that are grammatically correct, try the following:

**Model good speech and language for your child:** Speak clearly. Talk about what you are doing as you play and interact with your child. Give him good models of correct grammar and pronunciation. If you know your child is just figuring something out (e.g. how to use irregular past tense), you may wish to emphasize this more in your speech. For example, you might say “Oh, you **ran** over to the swing and then you **fell** down?”

**Model the correct response:** If your child has said something incorrectly, repeat your child’s sentence but **emphasize the correct form** in your speech. Put a question in your voice as if you are clarifying that you heard him correctly. That way, your child will hear the good model without feeling like he said something wrong.

*Child: “Her got a puppy.”*

*You: “**She** has a puppy? Yes, **she** does. **She** looks like **she** really likes him.”*

**Expand on what your child has said:** Keep the conversation going by adding an additional comment to show you are interested and to give him even more language models:

*Child: “Dad drives a truck”.*

*You: “Yes, Dad drives a truck. He loves to drive his truck. Sometimes, he goes far away”.*

**Use comments and “good” questions:** By using comments more often, we can keep the conversation going. Too many questions or the wrong type of questions will not keep the conversation going. For example, when you use “testing” questions (where you already know the answer before you ask such as “What colour is your shirt?”), the child is often not interested and the conversation stops. Instead, try comments like “Tell me about the show” or open-ended questions like “How did you build such a tall tower?” to get your child to tell you more. Also, questions that start with “why” and “how come” encourage more than one word answers. Don’t be too hard on yourself. It is hard to remember to use open-ended questions but by trying to comment more and question less, your child will interact more and you will get more communication.

**Make-believe:** Pretending is a good way to practice “grown-up” talking. Play house, restaurant, grocery store, cars and trucks or taxi driver. You can show your child “grown-up speech” as you play together.

**Puppets:** Puppets are another way to play make-believe. Make your puppets talk, play together and act out stories.

**Read books:** Children often have favorite books that they love to have read to them over and over again. Although you may find the same story boring, your child needs to hear those **same** words said that **same** way many times. To increase your child’s awareness of print, occasionally point to a word on the page and comment on how it is spelled. Point out words that rhyme (and are spelled the same) and comment on letters that are the same as a letter the child might know (e.g. “Look, this word is “Balloon”. That starts with “B” just like your name). Once your child knows the story, try the following:

- Have your child fill in the ending of the book before you get there.
- Spend time talking about the parts of the story (main characters, where and when it happened, your child’s favorite part, how the book made them feel).
- Help your child draw a picture of something that happened in the book
- You could draw several pictures representing the main events in the book; then help your child put them in order. Ask what is happening in each one. You could then write a brief sentence for each one and staple the pages in order so you have a mini version of the book. Your child can tell you what sentence he/she wants you to write.
- Act out the story (you could even gather some objects that were in the story and use them to act it out).

**Telling stories:** After your child has listened to you tell or read him the same story a few times, encourage him to take his turn telling you the story. Use dolls and figurines to make up stories. Be sure to model starting with “who” the story is about and “where” it is happening and make sure you have a clear ending.

**Songs and Nursery Rhymes:** Children love the rhythm and repetition of songs and rhymes. It is a great way for them to learn about sounds and words.

**Don’t use baby talk:** Always use the correct names of things and the correct pronunciation when you speak to your child. At first, you may find his way of talking “cute” but you are not helping him outgrow his baby talk if you talk the same way.