

What to Teach Before Talking

Developing Communication Skills Across Home and Early Learning Contexts

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This material complements pp. 72–76 in *Focus on Developmentally Appropriate Practice: Equitable and Joyful Learning with Infants and Toddlers*.

Tasha models the point gesture, Camila has an action to imitate, and she may copy her teacher’s point with her own.

Early Expressive Skills: Gestures

Knowing about the development of early communication skills can guide family-teacher partnerships and decisions about what to focus on at home and in early learning settings. “Early Expressive Communication Targets” on the next page offers an overview of these skills and examples of what Camila’s (18 months old) family and teacher can look for and support in both the home and program contexts.

Identifying Strategies to Promote Early Expressive Communication

Modeling point gestures has several important benefits for infants and toddlers. First, when adults model pointing with words, infants get a clue to help them determine what the adult’s words mean. For instance, when Tasha, Camila’s teacher, sees a bird on a tree branch on their daily class walk, she points and says, “There’s a bird!” Camila has a better idea about what Tasha’s words are referring to than she would have if Tasha had used words alone. Without the model of the point, she might assume that Tasha was referring to the squirrel running up the tree. Second, when

Choosing Daily Routines to Implement New Strategies and Support Skills

A key feature of language support is to choose specific routines for integrating strategies to help the child begin to use their targeted skill. Talking through the choice of routines helps caregivers be intentional: Tasha and Veronica, Camila’s mother, do not have to think about the strategies all day, every day. Instead, they can focus on high-impact moments that happen naturally throughout the day. Planning and intentionally creating opportunities across settings will increase the opportunities Camila has to learn to point, and planning together strengthens the team that is supporting her.

Tasha and Veronica talk about what happens each day at home and in the center, which routines Camila likes, and which would be a good fit for everyone to try out the strategies they’ve identified. Each key caregiver is represented in the plans. As they choose routines, they fill out a chart with what they would like to see Camila do in the routine (point), who has what role, and which strategies they will use to support her. Veronica and Tasha select outside routines, such as walks and playing in the yard, and nap time and bedtime routines as opportunities to use modeling gestures and environmental arrangements to encourage Camila to point (see “Tasha and Veronica’s Plan” on page 3).

Early Expressive Communication Targets

| Early Expressive Communication Target | Why Is It Important? | What to Look for | Example |
|---|--|--|--|
| <p>Vocalizations</p> | <p>Vocalizations are the foundation for using words.</p> <p>Vocalizing can help children begin to communicate intentionally, even if their sounds begin as vocal play.</p> <p>Vocalizing can help children become partners in a “conversation” with an adult caregiver.</p> | <p>Infants start to make sounds in the following progression:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Vowel-like sounds › Vowels › Early developing consonants like /p/, /b/, /d/, /k/, /g/, and /m/ › Consonant-vowel combinations like “dadadada” | <p>Camila uses long strings of babbling with different consonant sounds. When her dad, Marco, turns on music in the car, she excitedly says “badabaga!” with a squeal.</p> |
| <p>Shared or joint attention</p> | <p>Shared attention shows the child knows that they have to engage the other person to direct the adult’s attention to an event or object.</p> <p>Babies who develop strong shared attention skills go on to have larger vocabularies.</p> <p>Shared attention skills are a key early social communication skill that helps children learn words and engage with others.</p> | <p>A child uses their gaze, vocalizations, or gestures to draw someone’s attention to something.</p> <p>A child joins into another person’s focus of attention by following the adult’s gaze and pointing gesture.</p> | <p>Camila uses her gaze to share an interest with others. During floor play, she notices another child putting puzzle pieces into a plastic bin. As he dumps them out, Camila looks at him, then at Tasha, then back to the other child.</p> |
| <p>Gestures</p> | <p>Gestures help a child communicate intentionally, and caregivers can easily tell what the child is referring to.</p> <p>Pointing, in particular, is linked to later language outcomes.</p> <p>Words for objects that children point to end up in their vocabularies a few months later.</p> | <p>A child uses gestures like reaching, showing, giving, and pointing (major milestones in a child’s first year).</p> <p>Pointing tends to emerge later than reaching, showing, and giving.</p> | <p>Camila uses the reach gesture to tell Tasha, Veronica, and Marco (Camila’s father) what she wants. She also gives them objects so that they can take a turn. She is learning to use a point to share her interest in something or to request.</p> |

Tasha and Veronica's Plan for Helping Camila Point

| Routine | Home | Early Learning Program |
|-----------------------------------|--|--|
| Walks and playtime outside | Veronica and Marco will point to objects and events around them as they play outside in the front yard or go on walks. They will model gestures with words by pointing to interesting things around them as they name them. These might include cars, trucks, neighbors, bikes, trees, flowers, and butterflies. | Tasha takes the class on daily walks in their buggy. She will model gestures with words by pointing to interesting things around them as she names them. She will put Camila closest to her in the buggy so that Tasha can lean in and look at Camila while modeling gestures. She will point to interesting things like trucks, buildings, birds, planes, and chalk. |
| Getting ready for sleep | At home, Veronica, Marco, and Lita (Camila's abuelita) will put Hops (Camila's stuffed bunny) on top of the bookshelf as an environmental arrangement to encourage Camila to point. As they rock her and read a story, they will model gestures with words as they look at pictures. | At the center, Tasha and her assistant, Sammie, get the toddlers ready for naptime. Camila usually wants her pacifier and Hops, so they will put both on a shelf as an environmental arrangement to elicit a point from Camila. If she does not point and just cries, they will model a point and say, "You want Hops, don't you?" |
| Mealtimes | During mealtimes at home, Marco and Lita will model pointing to items (a cup, banana, spoon), and they will name the object as they point. Dad will also use an environmental arrangement by placing desired items in sight but out of reach and prompting Camila to point to ask for what she would like. | At the center, Camila sits with peers during breakfast, lunch, and snack routines. Tasha and her assistant will use environmental arrangements by holding up mealtime choices and prompting Camila and her peers to point to what they would like. |