

Especially for toddlers with disabilities

Speaking Without Words

Talking and Listening

Most toddlers use words to get adults to give them the things they want. Sometimes toddlers with disabilities are not able to use words to talk. This practice guide includes different ways toddlers can communicate with others without speaking.

What is the practice?

This practice guide is about ways to help toddlers interact with others and ask for things without using spoken words. This is called alternative and augmentative communication.

What does the practice look like?

Toddlers can communicate in different ways. A toddler can hold up her cup to say she wants more milk. A toddler can point down to ask his dad to help him down from his high chair. A toddler can show her dad a picture of a swing to “say” she wants to go outside to swing. These non-speaking toddlers are “asking” for what they want without using speech. The main idea is to encourage your toddler to “talk” in the way that works best for him.

How do you do the practice?

Here are some ways young children speak without talking.

- Young toddlers who use few words often communicate by pointing to or showing the adult what they want. For example, a child might point to juice when wanting a drink or get a ball when wanting to play. Be sure to notice, say the word, and respond to these requests whenever possible.
- Young toddlers who are able to move their hands and fingers can use sign language to “talk” to others. A child can learn new signs that increase the number of things he can “talk” about. To get your toddler to use more “words,” use signs for his favorite activities, people, and objects. Be sure to say the word when your child signs it.
- Pictures of favorite foods, toys, and people make it possible for a young toddler to “talk” without speaking. Place a few picture cards in various parts of your house. Let your child show or point to a picture to let you know what she wants. When your child points to a picture, name what’s in the picture. Encourage, but don’t force, her to say it too. Regularly add new pictures for her.
- Simple switch devices that “say” one or two words when touched can make it easy for a child to “talk.” Words like “yes,” “no,” or names of favorite toys or people, are a good way to start.

How do you know the practice worked?

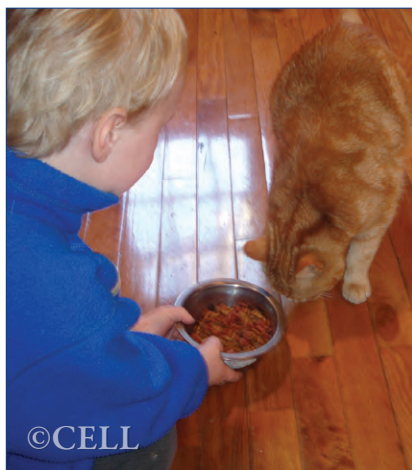
- Is your child asking for things more often?
- Is your child learning new “words” to ask for what he wants?
- Is your child using this way of “talking” to interact with others?



Take a look at more communication fun

Let's Talk About Toys

Briscoe was born prematurely. As a young toddler, he does not use many words yet. His mom decided to paste pictures of his favorite toys on a picture board. She started with one picture of his favorite toy tractor. She kept showing him the picture when handing him the tractor. She put the board in the living room where Briscoe plays, so he would see it often. Every time she saw him playing with his tractor, she showed him the picture. One day Briscoe saw the tractor picture and took it to his mom. She immediately found the toy tractor, said “tractor,” and gave the toy to Briscoe. Since this happened, they have slowly been adding new pictures of other favorite things to the picture board.



Favorite Manual Signs

Lee is a 35-month-old toddler who uses only two or three words. But he knows 10 to 15 signs for his favorite things and people. Since he loves his family's cat, Clarice, he and his dad have a special “sign” for Clarice. In the morning when they feed the cat, Lee helps his dad. Dad encourages Lee to combine two signs (words) by asking him questions that he can answer with signs he knows. Lee's signs include **food**, **Clarice**, **water**, **bowl**, **eat**, and **get**. Dad asks Lee, “What do we need first?” Lee signs back, “Food.” His dad continues, “Where does Clarice's food go?” and Lee signs, “bowl.” Dad responds with another question, “Your bowl or Clarice's bowl?” Lee laughs and signs, “Clarice.”

Device Is Nice

Pablo is a 35-month-old toddler who does not use any words to communicate. He has a simple adaptive communication device that says words or simple phrases when a switch is touched. He likes to have his mother read him stories. Pablo's device is set so he can make it say “yes,” “no,” “turn the page,” “my turn,” and “read more.” When they are ready to read, Pablo's mother makes sure the device is close by. She gets three or four of her son's favorite books and asks him which one he wants to read. Pablo points to his first choice. Mom begins reading the story. She stops often to ask Pablo questions, and he answers by pushing labeled pads on the voice box. When they finish the first book, Mom says, “I guess we are finished reading.” Pablo quickly responds with “read more” from his device and points to another book to read.

