

How to Talk to Kids While They Play

Language that Fosters Connection, Confidence and Creativity



With
Cara Tyrrell, M.Ed.

Today's Roadmap

- Scaffold Communication with The Talking Triangle
- Learn the 5 Sentence Types
- Explore 6 Styles of Play
- Learn and Practice Intentional Sentence Starters during play



Play is learning.

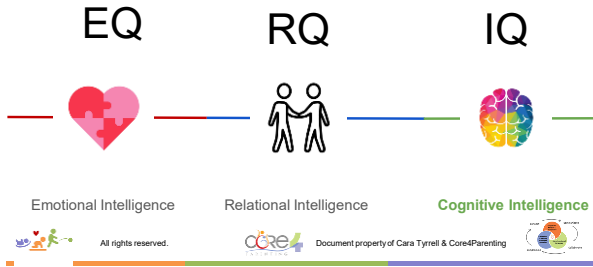


Every word.
Every action.
Every interaction.
Every effort & outcome...

Forms a *child's belief* about
themselves as a learner.

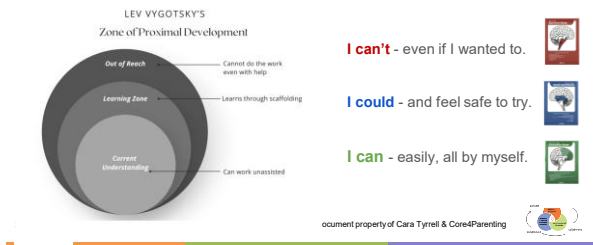


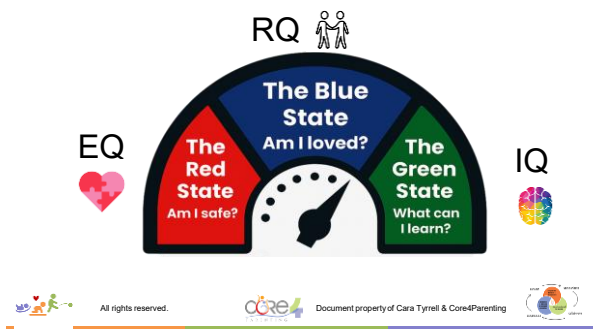
The Three Intelligences



Where does learning happen?

"If life is always easy then I'm probably doing something wrong" - Anonymous



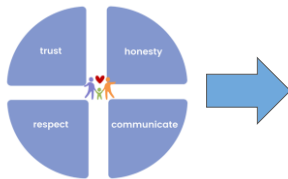


"As a teacher you have one primary job (and it is not what you think). Every time you step into a classroom, your primary role is to *build relationships with the children in your care.*"

Talk To Them Early and Often - Chapter 1

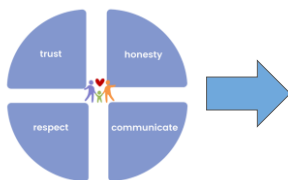


1. Relationship



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1. Relationship



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2. Teaching



Autonomy of Voice as They Grow Up

Listen for:

I am statements.

Identification of feelings.

Awareness that feelings are temporary and can change over time.

Physical play boundaries with a trusted adult.

This kid is all of us right now 😊



Definition of Language

language
/ˈlæŋɡwɪʃ/

See definitions in:

All Linguistics Computing

noun

1. the method of human communication either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way.
"a study of the way children learn language"
2. a system of communication used by a particular country or community.
"the book was translated into twenty-five languages"

Similar: tongue speech mother tongue native tongue dialect



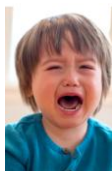
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Language vs. Communication





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Communication ≠ Language

With our hands



With our faces



With our bodies



Language vs. Communication



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How Many Words a Day?



How Many Words a Day?



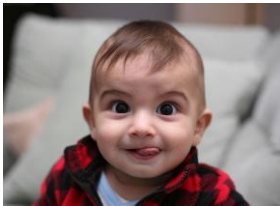
16,215 to 20,207
words per day*



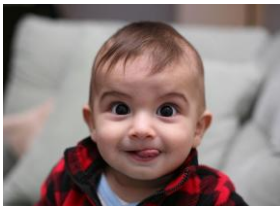
*Dimidjian, Fingerman, et al. 2025



What % of language is verbal?



What % of language is verbal?

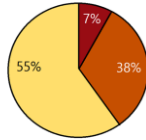


7%



The 7 - 38 - 55 Rule

Albert Mehrabian's rule of interpersonal communication



7% Spoken Words
38% Tone of Voice
55% Body Language



The Talking Triangle

Hierarchy of Meaning-Based Language Links



University of Utah Center for Language Acquisition



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Broken Connections - Still Face Experiment



Words



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Intentional Language Goal

To choose words that

1. Create *Connection*

→ safety & permission to explore

1. Build *Confidence*

→ develops growth mindset and a fail forward attitude

1. Cue *Creative Thinking*

→ leads to ideation and cognitive problem solving



5 Sentence Types

1

IMPERATIVE

Imperative sentences give a command or deliver an order.

Reactive Examples

"Clean up."
"Come here."
"Stop that."

Responsive Examples

"Show me ..."
"You choose."
"Let's go."



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5 Sentence Types

2

INTERROGATIVE

Interrogative sentences ask questions.

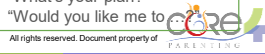


Reactive Examples

"Why did you do that?"
 "Why can't you just...?"
 "What's wrong (with you)?"
 "Is that how you share?"

Responsive Examples

"I wonder if you will..."
 "What's your choice?"
 "What's your plan?"
 "Would you like me to



5 Sentence Types

3

NEGATIONS

Negative sentences are statements which assert that something* is false, untrue, wrong, or does not exist.

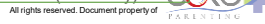


Reactive Examples

"No (name)!"
 "You can't..."
 "Don't do that."

Responsive Examples

"That is not a choice."
 "My answer is not changing."
 "You can feel (emotion), but you may still not (boundary)."



5 Sentence Types

4

EXCLAMATORY!

Exclamatory sentences convey message and give information through emotionally charged sounds, words, or phrases.



Reactive Examples

"What a mess!"
 "Enough!"
 "Oh no! Not again!"
 "Stop that!"

Responsive Examples

"Wow! / Yikes!"
 "Holy moly cannoli!"
 "You did it! Well done!"



5 Sentence Types

5

DECLARATIVE

Declarative sentences convey messages and give information through statements.



Reactive Examples

Rarely used in a reactive manner.

Responsive Examples

"It looks/sounds like you ..."
 "It is time to ..."
 "You are / You chose to ..."



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5 Sentence Types

1. Imperative (commands)
2. Declarative (statements)
3. Interrogative (questions)
4. Exclamatory
5. Negations



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Talking Triangle



+

5 Sentences

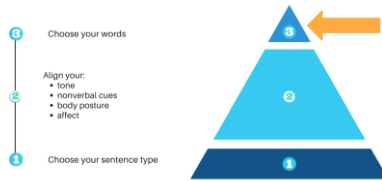
Imperative (*command*)
 Declarative (*statement*)
 Interrogative (*question*)
 Exclamatory (*emotional*)
 Negations (*dismissive*)

=



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The Teaching Triangle



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Listen for word choice / sentence type



Wow. You found the color match.

Woah! Try again.

Wow. That's hard work.

It's not clicking, huh? I know why.

You're doing a great job buddy. That's upside down which is why it's not clicking.

That is learning. Yes! You are learning while you are playing.

Types of Play

Mildred Parten's Stages (circa 1929)

Parten's 6 Stages of Play	
Unoccupied Play	In this stage of play children move their bodies and observe their world.
Solitary Play	In this stage of play children will have more focus and sustained play with an object than in very little interest in interaction with others.
Onlooker Play	In this stage of play children will watch others play but will not engage in the play. They may converse or imitate with other players but will still not engage in the play.
Parallel Play	In this stage of play children will play with the same materials as the same age as other children but will be focused on their own individual play.
Associative Play	In this stage of play children will engage socially with other players and even share materials but each player is doing their own thing.
Cooperative Play	In this stage of play children together with a common goal. They share materials, share and even develop rules to make the play happen.



Characteristics of Play

LoveEvery's First Year Stages (circa 2015)

The Looker	0- 3 months
The Charmer	3 - 5 months
The Senser	5 - 6 months
The Inspector	7 - 8 months
The Explorer	9-10 months
The Thinker	11-12 months



Uninterrupted Independent Play

Allow Side by Side Silence

- Allows for ample processing time
- Healthy relationship building
- Safety in silent connection
- Building independent play tolerance
- Repeatedly practicing cognitive planning and outcomes



Risky Independent Play

Playing 'alone' while engaging in a self-chosen activity.

Not seeking help from others, although they are near trusted adults.

Skill Building:

- Self-reliance
- Concentration
- Creativity
- problem solving
- Self-regulation
- internal focus
- exploration of materials and outcomes of actions(cause/effect).



Concrete (Literal) Play

Child uses objects for their intended function (stacking blocks, pushing a toy car).

Opportunities to **build diverse vocabulary** and introduce 'function' words related to the objects

Skills:

- early cause-and-effect
- develops fine and gross motor skills
- creates opportunities for early problem-solving and emotional resilience. (ie. the blocks fall over)





Adult Led / Child Directed Interactive Play

Back and forth sharing & turn-taking

Serve and return communication.



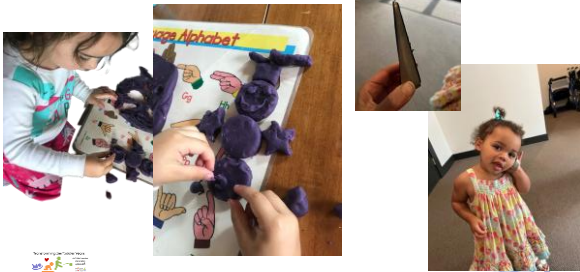
Unreciprocated Child-Led Interactive Play



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Creative (Symbolic) Play



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Parallel Play

Children playing near other kids, or alongside them, but not WITH them.

Side-by-side Independent players!



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Safe Risky Play



Supported Risky Play

*What do we
tend to say?*



Supported Risky Play

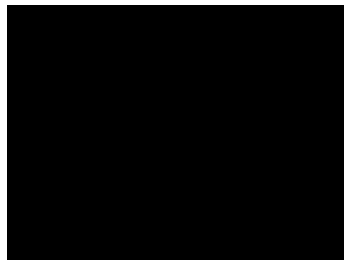
"You're doing it."

"You have one more to go."

"Can you make it?"

*"Oh wow! Look at that
determination."*

She says, "I did it!"



Let's Talk the Talk!

Three Reminders & Two Cautions

1. Silence is golden (connection)
2. KISS! - Keep It Short & Sweet (communication)
3. Allow processing time (confidence)



K.I.S.S: Processing Time (action)



K.I.S.S: Processing Time (verbal answer)



Intentional Language to Avoid



Sarcasm relies on a type of subtlety that most children under the age of eight do not pick up on

They think literally so your words either make no sense or they interpret them incorrectly.

"Oh great! You spilled your milk again."
 "Fan-tastic! You are going to have *another* meltdown."
 "Wonderful! You broke your new toy."

"the use of irony or mock or convey contempt"



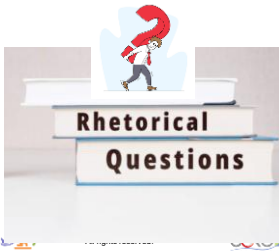
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Intentional Language to Avoid



Behavior: "Is that how we share?" in response to a child who keeps grabbing toys and running away.

New Concepts: "Is that how your shoes go on?" in response to a child who put their boots on the wrong feet.

Interactive Play: "Isn't this fun?" in response to a child who you are trying to engage after their parent left and they are currently crying.



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Collaborative Discipline Framework



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Language that Anchors Attention



Connect before you Expect!

- Get down on their level
- Say their name
- Say, "Can you hear my voice?"
- Say, "Look at my nose so I know you hear me."
- Say or Whisper, "I have something to tell you" or "I have a question to ask you."



Emotional Response Language

Sensory Response Language

It feels like (you are)...

It sounds like (you are)...

It looks like (you are)...

Sentence Type: Declarative
 Subtype: Reflective
 Outcome: Creates
 Connection







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"Tell Me More"

Encourage connection and open communication, creative thinking, expressive storytelling through serve and return whether they can "talk" yet or not!

Sentence Type: Imperative
Subtype: Curiosity
Outcome: All 3 C's!



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"You Wish"

It **looks like** you both want to play with the dragon.

You wish you could have a turn at the same time.

You could say and sign, "my turn please."



Sentence Type: Declarative
Subtype: Observational
Outcome: Cues Creative
Thinking



Process Based Praise & Encouragement



"You are trying really hard."

"You did it!"

"You did it all by yourself."

"Good work."

"You must be so proud of yourself."

"Hmm, That looks tricky."

Sentence Type: Declarative
Subtype: Reflective
Outcome: Builds Confidence



"What's Your Plan?"

A proactive question inserted in potentially problematic/unsafe behavior and calm, creative play.

- **You are trying a new way to go up the stairs.**
- **I trust that you feel safe.**
- **Wow! Look at your feet doing their job!**



Support Cognitive Planning

Wow! You are really high.

It looks like you feel safe.

What's your plan?

I wonder how your feet will get down.

You can say, "help please" if you need me.

Sentence Type: Interrogative
Subtype: Curious
Outcome: Cues Creative
Thinking



"Wow! That was Unexpected"

- **Auditory** A loud noise (fire alarm)
- **Behavior** A child throws a toy across the room
- **Sharing** A child takes a toy from another child
- **Sensory** An experience doesn't go or feel the way they thought it would



Wow, that was unexpected!

We raked all the leaves for jumping.

Kate jumped and had a big smile.

It looked like fun.

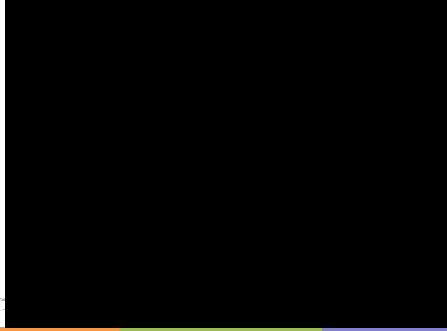
You jumped and are crying.

You don't like how it feels on your body.



Sentence Types: Exclamatory + Declarative
Subtype: Surprise + Reflective
Outcome: Connection +
Permission to Feel





"Show Me"

Show me when...

Show me how to...

Show me where ...



Sentence Type: Imperative
Subtype: Invitational
Outcome: All 3 C's!

Turn Are You Questions into You Are Statements



"What are you making?"

becomes...

"You are making a purple snowman!"

Sentence Type: Declarative
Subtype: Reflective
Outcome: Builds
Confidence

Affirm & Confirm/Correct

C - "orange coat"
A - "Yes! That is the big, orange raincoat."

Or

C - "blue coat"
A - "Yes! That is a raincoat. It is orange."



Sentence Type: Exclamatory + Declarative
Subtype: Affirmative +
Informational
Outcome: All 3 C's!



"I Wonder"

I wonder when...

I wonder if...

I wonder how...

I wonder who...



Sentence Type: Declarative
Subtype: Reflective
Outcome: Cues Creative
Thinking



"Hear the click?"



"I have an idea. Would you like to hear it?"



(baby is trying to play the xylophone but the tool is missing)

"Hmm, that looks tricky."

How could you play the xylophone?

I have an idea. Would you like to hear it?

I wonder if this orange block will make it play.
Hooray! We solved it together.

Sentence Type(s): Declarative + Interrogative
Subtype: Informational +
Permissive Outcome: Connection +
Cognitive Planning



"What if (you/we)"



Aww, that was unexpected.

You were building and your tower fell down.

Good thing blocks are for building. Let's build together.

What if we make it shorter?

First the blue block, then the green one.

Sentence Type: Interrogative
Subtype: Conditional
Outcome: Cues Creative
Thinking



Interpret Intonation and Affect

Talk about your feelings.
Connect emotional vocabulary to how you look and sound to help them understand their feelings and emotions.





Let's Play!

Intentional Play Mantra

*I don't test.
I teach.*



Language Stacking Example

Child is playing with stacking/nesting cups and really wants them to build up like a tower, but it keeps collapsing.

Hmm, **that looks** tricky.

You wish they would stack, but they keep falling.

You are trying really hard.

Yeah! You put the red cup on the orange cup.

I wonder what color you will choose next.

I have an idea. Would you like to hear it?

Here. (hands them the cup) **You could** try pink.

Hooray! **You did it** all by yourself. Good work.



Language Stacking Example

Gross and fine motor manipulative toys with motion

It looks like we have three pegs. This one is red. This one is yellow. This one is green.

I wonder which you'll put in first. Nice! Which goes next? This one is last.

Did you know that if you push the purple lever they will fall?

Would you like to try it? (they push, then start to cry because it's loud)

Wow! That was unexpected. It was so loud!

It sounds like we should choose a different toy.



Let's Play!

What do we tend to say? Vs. What should we say to...

♥ Create Connection 🧑🏿 Build Confidence 🎨 Cue Creative Thinking

What shape is this?

What color is this?



I see a yellow star.

Show me where it goes.



Let's Play!

What do we tend to say? Vs. What should we say to...

♥ Create Connection 🧑🏿 Build Confidence 🎨 Cue Creative Thinking

How many circles?

Count for me.



I see five circles: red, orange, orange, yellow, yellow.

I wonder which you'll put in first.



Thank You & Let's Stay Connected

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