

# Children learn language from their **parents**

When children use language during play and when interacting with other children, they practise how to use the language in a targeted, creative and precise manner – the language is automated. However, children mainly learn language from adults. They acquire the language, which they hear adults use, both the vocabulary and the expressions characterising each individual family's language, and they acquire the way adults use language when speaking together and when talking about events and experiences. It is therefore important to be aware that all adults serve as language role models, but that you, as parents, play a particularly important role for your child's language development.

## Parents are language role models

Children learn language by, among other things, mimicking the way their parents use language. While young children need to mimic the words and phrases used by adults and learn from the way adults support the language through body language, mimics and gestures, older children need help to expand their vocabulary and to work out the grammatical structures of the language and its applications. The child will need to learn that the same word can have two different meanings (e.g. "can" is both a modal verb and a noun) and learn to use synonyms (a "bed" can also be called a "bunk", a "cot", a "sack" etc.), and he or she must learn to use and understand both irony and humour.

As parents, you are your children's most important role models, because you are the ones spending most time with your children, and because you are the ones with whom the child has the closest emotional ties. You have the opportunity to talk with your child in many different situations every day, for example in connection with morning routines when waking your child, getting dressed, eating breakfast etc. It is precisely these routine situations which are useful for repeatedly mentioning the specific objects related to the routines. You can talk about what it is like to get up early in the morning, how the child has slept, what the child has dreamt, and you can talk about what clothes are suitable for that day's particular activities. Clothing serves as an excellent opportunity to repeat the names of each garment and to use hypernyms and hyponyms (underwear, outerwear, sleepwear, socks, trousers etc.) as well as talk about the body, colours and directions. It is very important to make sure that the child is actively participating in the conversation, and that you talk with the child and not just to the child. Having conversations is crucial for the child being able to develop a varied vocabulary and gain social experiences with the language.

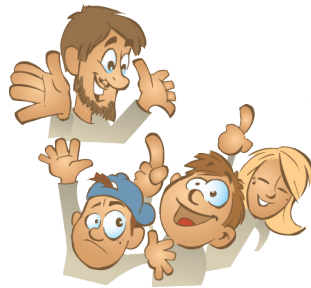
If you find it difficult or awkward to have conversations with your child, it may be useful to talk with somebody at their kindergarten about how you can become strong language role models and how you can create communicative situations and experiences which involve the child and stimulate his or her chances of gaining language experience.

It is important that you meet children who are unwilling to communicate halfway and remain in their sphere of interest for a longer period. These children may be particularly vulnerable to communication-inhibiting factors, e.g. if they find that they are not listened to or that no efforts are made to meet them halfway. Here, both parents and educators must make a special effort.

# Conversation between parents and children

A useful starting point is to first and foremost make the child actively participate in the conversation, i.e. that you both encourage and challenge your child through conversations in your everyday life. This is very much a question of listening to what the child has to say and to support the conversation by asking interested and elaborating questions.

A number of supportive language strategies have been prepared, which may be useful for you to use with your child.



## 1. Use open questions

Ask questions which cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Open questions often begin with who, what and where.

Example: "Where do think the ladybird is flying to?"

"What was most fun at kindergarten today?"



## 2. Follow the child's interests

When children show an interest in, for example, princesses, Spiderman, tractors or the ladybird which he or she just spotted, they enjoy talking about what is on their minds at that point in time. By following the child's interests, you can gradually expand and develop the content of the conversation and thus introduce new words and perspectives. You move from a specific level to a more abstract one to expand the child's vocabulary, field of experience and ability to categorise.



## 3. Wait for the child's answer

Give the child time to answer! A child may need some time to find the words he or she needs to answer, or perhaps the child needs time to actually understand the question. Allowing yourselves time and waiting for the child to find the right words and construct sentences results in a learning process where the child acquires confidence in mastering different linguistic challenges.

## 4. Interpret and expand on what the child is saying

Expand on what the child is saying. It may be necessary to help the child find the right words and phrases to clearly express him or herself

Example: Three-year-old boy: "It's there, on that thing hanging next to the fridge."

Adult: "Do you mean a cupboard?"

Boy: "Nooo, the thing you hang paper on."

Adult: "Ah, the pin board – so your drawing is hanging on the pin board next to the fridge."





### 5. Help the child verbalise

Feel free to repeat the same word many times, and use it in different ways, so that the child learns the word's various meanings and the different ways in which it can be used. When you frequently name things and concepts in the child's immediate surroundings, the child acquires new words and can thus gradually include these words and concepts in his or her own language.

Example: You can, for example, hide a small teddy bear in an unexpected place and take turns saying where Teddy is. For example, Teddy is sitting in the hall, in the bathroom or in the third drawer down in the kitchen. Afterwards, the child can hide Teddy and tell the adult where to look.



### 6. Explain unfamiliar words to the child

All children need to have new words and concepts explained to them. Children need to have individual words explained and to make sense to them. Talk with the child about individual words, for example drawer, windowsill or garage to make sure that the child has acquired the word and understands what it means.

Research has shown that the following ways of explaining words to children are particularly effective:

- Use another word with similar meaning
- Use gestures or sounds to illustrate the meaning of the word
- Use the word in a different context
- Point at illustrations corresponding to the word in question
- Include specific materials to help the child visualise the word



### 7. Relate to something which is familiar to the child

Include the child's personal experiences in the conversation. It may be useful to relate shapes, colours and numbers to objects whose names and functions are already familiar to the child.

Example: "Do you remember we saw a tall tower the day we took the bus?"

"When we went to the amusement park, you had a ride on the merry-go-round and felt a tickling feeling in your tummy..."



### 8. Draw on the child's existing language competencies

Encourage and support the child in telling small stories where the child uses his or her own experiences and language skills. It may be stories about the child herself, tall stories

or imaginative stories about pirates or ballerinas. You can support the child's desire to tell stories by listening and asking curious questions.



#### 9. Do not correct the child's errors directly

You can correct the child by repeating what the child said in the correct way and, for example, by expanding the sentence as described above under item 4. When the child embarks on longer sentences, you can support these fully by repeating the entire sentence in correct form and by not simplifying the child's statement.



#### 10. Play with language whenever possible

Always play with language to make it fun to learn new words and sentences. The child will quickly discover new possibilities and will be challenged when language is used in new and surprising ways. You could, for example, read one of your child's favourite stories and then give the characters new (funny) names or change the events so that the child goes from being puzzled to being amused and then starts protesting and finally corrects your mistakes.

## Conversations about daily events

To be able to talk with your child about what he or she has experienced during the day in kindergarten, the educators must be good at telling you which overall themes they are working with and what actually happens during the day.

Some institutions take pictures of the children's activities during the day to continuously keep parents up to date. This allows children and parents to see the pictures together, and the child has the opportunity to talk about what it has been doing. The pictures enable you to return to what has happened during the day and ask the child specific questions: "I saw that you had built a cake shop in the sandpit – was it fun?" "What did you do?" etc.

Talk with your day care institution about how you and the educators can establish good language-supporting environments based on your own needs and prerequisites.

## Language assessment

In connection with the language assessment, you should, of course, be involved both before and after the assessment. If the educators believe that it is relevant to assess your child's language, you are under an obligation to accept that such language assessment is performed. Once the language assessment has been performed, you will be presented with the result, so that you and the educators can plan how to best support your child's language learning. You may need to read books at home, which match the themes the kindergarten is currently working with, or you may need to focus more extensively on the supportive language strategies mentioned above. You may also be given a specific list of selected words which your child should be familiar with to make the most of the activities taking place in the kindergarten.

## Dialogic reading

Another type of activity which supports your child's language is 'dialogic reading', a read-aloud method in which you involve the child actively in a conversation about the structure and plot of the book. Dialogic reading allows you to adapt the conversation to the child's interest and language level, which is particularly important for children with language challenges.

Transforming reading aloud to dialogic reading

### Before reading

- Read the book before reading it with your child, and roughly decide what you want to talk about and which questions you will ask about the story when reading the book together.
- Make reading the book a nice experience and a special occasion.
- Introduce the book to your child: show him/her the front page and the back page and tell your child who has written and illustrated the book.
- Ask the child open questions about the book's appearance.
- You could let your child hold a small object which has a special meaning in the story.

### During reading

- Listen to the child, and be open to questions during reading. When your child asks a question, stop reading and answer him/her.
- Let your child's curiosity set the agenda, be attentive, ask what catches your child's interest and listen to his or her answer. Listen to the answer, and include in the conversation to the extent possible
- Make your child a co-narrator.
- When reading the book again, encourage the child to tell what he or she remembers, e.g. from the pictures. Help the child verbalise the story, if he or she cannot remember the correct words or phrases. Explain unfamiliar words, and feel free to add new knowledge to your child's existing knowledge.

### After reading

- Talk with your child about the content, also after you have closed the book. Use the new words from the book – the more often your child hears the words, the more likely he or she will be to remember them and use them.

Choose books that are about something which your child is interested in or familiar with or books containing the words which your child, in your opinion, particularly needs to learn. Books which look particularly suitable for dialogic reading:

- contain colourful illustrations that support comprehension
- are of a suitable length
- tell a fictitious story
- are, in terms of their content, suitable for the child's age

It is a good idea to read the same book with the child three to four times over a short period of time using the principles for dialogic reading, while keeping the supportive language strategies in mind.

References:

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Further inspiration for parents is available at the Sprogpakken website:  
[www.sprogpakken.dk](http://www.sprogpakken.dk)

