

# Use Your Words: Supporting Expressive Language Development and Use

An article by Colby Pearce, Clinical Psychologist



“Use your words” is an oft-used statement among parents of young children who are taking their first steps in using language to communicate. Using their words is an important part of children developing their expressive language skills, and their socialisation.

As a very young infant, a child’s capacity to express themselves is limited to crying and, shortly thereafter, smiling. As the child grows, they develop and use a range of gestures and behaviours to communicate with others about their experience. Increasingly, they babble with communicative intent. Later, they use speech.

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A child’s use of these methods of communication, and their developmental progression to formal speech, is influenced by two key factors:

1. Whether their efforts to communicate are met with an understanding response from adults in a caregiving role; and
2. Modelling of the use of expressive gestures and speech by their caregiver(s).

In a conventional nurturing care environment, an infant’s caregiver(s) spends a lot of time considering and responding to the following question: **What is going on for baby?** Applied consistently, the infant has the experience that their experience is understood, important and will be addressed by their caregiver(s). This encourages the infant to express themselves and trust in the sensitive responsiveness of their caregiver(s).

In a conventional nurturing care environment, an infant’s caregiver(s) speak and gesture in a manner that reflects their understanding of **What is going on for baby**. That is, they reflect back the infant’s emotions and model the use of gestures that communicate the infant’s experience and intentions. Importantly, they also use **words** that go with the infant’s experience.

If you are unsure of what I am referring to, consider a person in your family who has a pet (usually a dog or cat), or even yourself, if you have one. Do you/they speak to your/their pet as if the pet were speaking to you/them. Do you/they speak their mind? I find that people I speak to about this generally identify with doing this. That is, we speak to our pets using words that they cannot themselves use to express themselves.

Getting back to the young child, in a conventional nurturing care environment where their caregiver(s) models communication and responds consistently to the child's efforts to communicate, the infant learns what goes with what and uses their learning. For example, they learn to point at objects of interest or those that are desired after seeing their caregiver(s) modelling this for them. They learn to clap when they are proud of themselves. Importantly, they learn what words go with what experience, such as learning what feeling words go with each feeling, in response to their caregiver(s) putting their feelings into words (*You are happy! You are sad.*).

So, when an adult in a caregiving role says to them "use your words", a child who has experienced conventional nurturing care will have the words and the trust in the responsiveness of adults in a caregiving role that supports their use of words to communicate about their experience.

What happens, then, among children who have not experienced conventional nurturing care during the early developmental period, such as having an adult who consistently responds to them in a way that supports their understanding and use of language to communicate about their experience? At least two things:

1. These children have a limited vocabulary for expressing themselves (often referred to as poor 'inner-state-language'); and
2. Their use of language to express themselves is restricted, both by limited language development and low expectations of the understanding and responsiveness of adults in a caregiving role.

Among children who have had a tough start to life, we often refer to **behaviour** as their **language**. This is problematic for a range of reasons, not least because they chronically feel misunderstood by others. Too often, this results in fear and mistrust and (further) undesirable behaviour; responses to the latter compounding their fear and mistrust and experience of being misunderstood.

In order to support the use of words to communicate about their experience among children who have had a tough start to life we need to:

1. Recognise that they are communicating about their experience via their behaviour; and
2. Support the development of their inner-state-language by *speaking their mind*.

This starts with a question. But it is the only question you must ask. You ask it to yourself. You ask: **What is going on for the child; right here, right now?** Then you **say the answer**. You say

what you see. In doing so, you are filling in the gaps in the child's experience, whereby you are helping them with words that go with their experience, and modelling their use. You say it as a statement, preferably of 10 words or less. A statement facilitates for the child the experience of being heard and understood. Trust flows from this, and the child is more likely to communicate with you thereafter using newly acquired words. A question about the child's experience, on the other hand, is experienced by the child as you not knowing what their experience is and compounds their experience of being unheard and misunderstood.

So, when you are communicating with a child who is recovering from a tough start to life and you find yourself wanting to ask them a question about their experience or wanting to tell them to use their words, pause for a moment. Think about what the child would say, if they had the words or would use them. Say the answer.

Use ***your*** words.

