

Games which help language

Large

pictures: in full colour, containing a mass of detail, are some of the best materials to get a child talking. Magazine advertisements are often very attractive.

Pre-reading books: for example the Ladybird "Talkabout" books. They contain many interesting pictures and picture stories, which can provide the focus for a conversation, as well as special tasks which focus on spoken language, such as "Which noise does each animal make?"

Favourite toys: which involve many components are good for vocabulary development, such as a doll's house and furniture, a farm and animals. Ensure that there's a team of toy dolls to be involved in all these places. Incidentally, boys get as much fun out of a doll's house as girls do.

Do what I do: you take turns to instruct each other in a sequence of events, such as "Touch your nose, clap your hands, scratch your ear." Good for listening comprehension as well as the production of sentence sequences.

Hunt the --- anything: bricks, pennies, toy cars. Parent and child take turns to hide and find. "Where's the car? Is it under the chair? Behind the clock?..." the game makes use of a lot of spatial language and is particularly useful if the parent has to stay in one place (e.g. while cooking, feeding another child etc).

What am I thinking of? Parent and child take turns to describe an object in a room, one feature at a time. "It's something big... with four legs... ." The game helps the development of vocabulary by making the child focus on the features of an object which are central to its meaning.

What's the difference? There are lots of puzzle books which show the child two pictures, identical in all but a few respects. The game is to spot the differences, but the child has to say what the differences are at the same time. Good for the development of complex sentences, especially those which make contrasts, comparisons etc.

Tell me what you're doing: Share out two sets of toys, so that you and the child have got exactly the same things (bricks, pieces of Lego etc). Sit so that you cannot see each other (or put a screen between you). The child has to make something and then tell you how to place your things to produce the same result. Very good for developing spatial words and sentence sequences.

Put these in order: There are several sets of words which tell a story if you've placed them in the correct order. Deal them out randomly. The child has to sort them out and then tell the story. Good for sentence sequences. Also, see if the child can tell the story again without the pictures.

Pretend games: With any kind of action figures. Parent and child can take a character and have to act out a scene using language appropriate to the character. Helps the development of role play.

Crazy world: Draw a picture of a familiar scene but put something incongruous into it, such as a car with two steering wheels, or a bicycle with only one wheel. The child has to find out what's wrong and say why. If you can't draw you may be able to find picture books which go in for this sort of thing, especially in children's annuals. Develops vocabulary and figurative expression.

Cut-outs: which can be assembled in different combinations are good for prompting vocabulary contrasts and sequences of related sentences. The child provides you with a commentary as the cut-outs are assembled. Alternately, you can keep the cut-outs yourself and the child has to ask you for them.

Puppets: are very useful in getting children to use questions, commands and other kinds of language which they may not so readily use to adults. A child may not wish to 'command' an adult but a puppet is different.

What's missing? Show a small selection of familiar objects. Take one away and see if the child can remember which it is. The task helps to train memory in relation to vocabulary. But don't take turns on this one – you might begin to feel very depressed when you fail more than the child does.

From "Listen to Your Child" by David Crystal