

It's morning time and your toddler is once again frantically grabbing at the refrigerator door. He knows what he wants, but more often than not, you don't have a clue. You try to calm him, open the refrigerator door, and begin your all too familiar routine of "show me what you want." If things go well, he'll grab for his cup of milk and move on with his day. However, if he is too worked up and upset from not being understood, or if you feel discouraged from not being able to understand your child, this exchange can all too often end in tears for both of you.

Maybe you wonder why your kid can't talk like little Johnny down the street, who is using full sentences. Maybe you know that your child is probably having trouble communicating due to a developmental disorder, hearing impairment, or a structural difference in their mouth such as a cleft lip or palate. Either way, it's frustrating for you and your child when simple needs are so hard to communicate.

The truth is: simple needs are really hard for all of us to communicate, and we just usually don't realize how much work it is. Let's look at all that needs to happen for your child to ask for that cup of milk. He needs to realize he wants his milk, find an adult who can help him, think of the words he needs to use, and get his mouth to say those words by properly moving his tongue, lips, and jaw. While paying attention to the movement of your lips, say slowly and out loud: "I want a cup of milk." Now, repeat this two more times paying attention to the movement of your tongue and jaw. As you can tell, your mouth gets quite a work out trying to get each of these little sounds out, including the funny thing your throat does to make the /c/ for "cup" and the /k/ sound at the end of "milk."

It is no wonder that many kids resort to pointing, reaching, grabbing at things, or figuring out how to open the refrigerator by themselves to get their needs met and it becomes easy to see why this can often lead to a melt down. The good news is that there are some things you can do to help your child learn new and successful ways of communicating to get them to move beyond the pointing and grunting they may be doing now. Your Early Intervention Provider can help you understand strategies to try and figure out how to make them a part of your daily routine with your child. In the meantime, here are a few ideas you can use to get started now.

Become A Play-By-Play Announcer: A simple way to help your child learn words is for you to use words as much as possible. If your child is watching you prepare a snack, start talking about what you are doing. For example: “I have an apple, let’s wash it off, here is a knife, cut, cut cut, now we can eat.” In that simple act your child was exposed to the words to label “apple” and “knife” along with the verbs “wash,” “cut,” and “eat.” It is also very helpful to narrate your child’s actions as well. If he is stacking blocks you could excitedly say “block up” each time he puts a new block on his tower and “boom, fall down” when he happily knocks them over.

Sound Off: Sounds are all around us and it is often easier for children to imitate sounds than words. Begin by calling your child’s attention to sounds in your environment and repeating them yourself. When you turn on the faucet, say “whoosh.” If a car drives past, say “vroom,” or if a timer beeps, then beep right along with it as you turn it off. This is modeling for your child that simple sounds can be fun to make and it encourages them to try this as well. Sounds should also be used while playing with a variety of toys. If you are playing with animals, be sure to make plenty of animal noises

as you move the toys along and encourage your child to do the same. If your child is into vehicles be sure to use plenty of “vrooms,” “toots,” “choo choos,” and “beeps” and you can incorporate “crash,” “boom,” and “bang” into many games. Don’t forget the power of expressions that can often be exaggerated and fun to say. Ones to try include: “wow,” “oh no,” “uh oh,” “mmmm,” or “yuck.”

The Power of Choice: Kids respond well to options, and allowing them to make choices can be a powerful motivator for communication. When getting your toddler dressed, show them two shirts they could pick from. Provide a simple label for each choice while holding it up, such as “red” for the red shirt and “blue” for the blue shirt. Your child may respond by pointing to or grabbing at their pick, which is fine at first. Just praise them and reinforce their pick by saying, “You want blue.” While they did not speak, they did benefit from hearing your labels for their choices and will begin to understand that words have a very powerful meaning. Once they understand the power of communicating, it’s time to up the ante and encourage spoken communication. When your child points to the blue shirt, ask them to “say blue,” and pause for their response. If they don’t say anything, simply prompt again, “say blue,” while moving the blue shirt closer to them. If they are still silent, try this one more time before giving it to them. However, if your child makes any sound when prompted to say the item he wants, whether it sounds correct or not, praise him by saying, “You said blue!” and give him the shirt right away. This is a great way to teach your child that items have labels and that he can speak those labels to get what he wants. You can also incorporate choice making into a variety of tasks such as picking toys or snacks.

Eyes On The Prize: As mentioned before, getting your mouth to move correctly when speaking words can be a difficult task for children. We can help them learn how to say certain words by calling their attention to our mouths while we speak. When encouraging your child to make choices, try to hold the items up near your face. This brings the focus near your mouth which allows your child to better model your mouth movements and also helps to encourage eye contact. This can also be incorporated into reading activities. When sharing a story, occasionally sit your child on the couch while you sit on the floor in front of them. This allows you to hold the book by your face while still allowing the book to be at eye level for your child. This is great to try when looking at picture books where most of the “reading” involves labeling pictures.

A Good Sign: Sign language can be used as a wonderful tool to help children understand the power of communication while helping to reduce frustration. Chances are, your child is already signing, you just may not be aware of it. If your child points or waves “hi” and “bye,” he is using a physical gesture to express a thought. You can build on this skill by teaching him some new signs to try. Some common early signs are “more,” “all done,” “eat,” “drink,” “book,” or “help.” However, you can feel free to teach other signs that may be more useful for you and your child. To learn how to form a sign, you could consult with your Early Intervention Provider, find a sign language book, or turn to technology through internet searches or phone apps. Once you know the sign you want to target and how to form the sign, such as “more,” it is time to start teaching. If your child is snacking on dry cereal, you can put a few pieces on his tray. Once those are finished, you can sign and say “more” before putting more cereal on his tray. Keep trying this throughout the snack and he may pick up on your hand movements. If he is

not attempting to imitate your hand movement, you can gently take his hands to form the sign for “more,” praise him for saying “more,” then, of course, put more cereal on his tray. You can use this teaching strategy with a variety of signs and throughout a variety of different activities.

By now, you are well on the path to helping your child develop his communication skills. Be sure to praise and honor all attempts at communication even if those early words don’t sound perfect. This doesn’t mean that you have to give in to every request for “cookie” as your child quickly realizes how powerful words really can be. You should still make sure your child knows that you understand him by saying, “You said cookie. You must want a cookie.” Then try to redirect to a more appropriate choice such as saying, “It’s not time to eat. Should we play trucks or ball?” It is also helpful to try not to anticipate your child’s needs. You may know that they want their cup of milk every morning, but rather than simply handing it to them, structure some communication. Label your actions by saying, “Let’s get your milk.” Then prompt them to repeat the word or sign for “milk” a few times before giving them their cup. Building in these teaching moments will become second nature to you after awhile and will do wonders for the development of your child’s communication.