

CORE SKILL: COMMUNICATE

Communicating & Speaking



What You Need to Know

Infants communicate their needs and feelings through gestures, looks, and sounds. As they get older, they might start saying a couple of words (e.g., ‘mama,’ ‘dada’) or using words like “wawa” for water. Be attuned to infants’ communication efforts and respond to them (e.g., make eye contact when they gaze, or pick them up when they raise their arms toward you). Your attuned responses tell infants that what they have to communicate is important, which motivates them to keep communicating! You can also encourage infants’ communication by putting their actions into words (e.g., “You are crawling over to get the doll”), narrating what you are doing (e.g., “I’m stirring your meal, and I’ll test it first to make sure it’s not too hot!”), and having back-and-forth exchanges with them.

Things to Consider

Some infants say their first words at 9 months and others at 18 months – in both cases, this is within typical developmental ranges. What is most important is that infants are advancing their communication skills in increasingly complex ways. For example, an infant could move from grunting what they want to reaching towards or pointing to it. A younger infant may go from cooing to making consonant-vowel sounds (e.g., da, ma, or ba).

Development of Child Communication

Between birth and 9 months, infants may:	Between 8 and 18 months, infants may:
Use facial expressions, gestures, or sounds (e.g., cooing, babbling) to engage familiar adults in social interaction.	Use a variety of ways to communicate interests, needs, wants, and requests (e.g., saying or making a sign for “more” when eating).
Explore sounds common in their language, such as “ma-ma” or “ba-ba.”	Communicate mainly about objects, actions, and events happening in the here and now.
	Initiate and participate in conversations by babbling and/or using gestures, words, or signs (e.g., clapping or calling a name to get someone’s attention).

Setting the Stage

Activities and materials that support the development of child communication:

- ◆ Read and discuss books. Encourage older infants to turn the pages and point to what they see. Ask questions about the pictures and engage with infants in back-and-forth exchanges.
- ◆ Play with a ball, car, or other toys that may stimulate back-and-forth exchanges.
- ◆ With older infants, play with puppets, dolls, baby phones, or other toys that may stimulate conversation.
- ◆ Set up play opportunities for infants to communicate through facial expressions (e.g., play to make silly faces), and through gestures and body movement (e.g., make music, or play with objects they can reach or point to).
- ◆ Sing simple songs with gestures that infants can repeat (e.g., “The Wheels on the Bus”).



Intentional Teaching Practices to Support Communicating and Speaking

OBSERVE	OBSERVE Carefully observe infants' communication. Pay attention to what sounds, facial expressions, and/or body movements they use to communicate their wants and needs. Notice times when back-and-forth exchanges are occurring and what these look and sound like, and times in which infants need your support to communicate.
FOCUS	Narrate Your Actions, Children's Actions, or Comment on Characters in Books Narrate what you are doing as you do it. Map language onto your actions and the actions of others so that infants can see and hear that language is an important way to communicate. Your own actions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "I am putting this blanket here because we do not need it anymore."◆ "I am spinning the mobile so that you can see how the animals move!" Children's actions: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ "We are washing your hands. After washing your hands, we need to dry them."◆ "You are rubbing your eyes and looking away. I think you're tired. It is time to take a nap."◆ "You are smiling – I think you like looking in the mirror. Do you want to look at yourself again?"
SCAFFOLD I	Repeat and Elaborate on What Children Say Simply repeating what an infant is communicating lets them know that you are paying attention and signals that what they have to communicate is important. You can also expand on what infants are communicating to expose them to more language. <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ When an infant waves, wave back and say, "Hello to you, too!"◆ When a baby says, "ma-ma," repeat, "You are seeing your ma-ma coming!"◆ When an older infant says, "duhduh," while reading a book, you can say, "Yes, that's a dog! Look, it has 4 legs and a tail (<i>point to them</i>)."
SCAFFOLD II	Support Back-and-Forth Exchanges Prompt infants to interact with you using sounds, gestures, and/or words. Be sure to allow pauses to give them the chance to respond. Pausing and looking expectantly during these interactions lets them know when it's their turn to "speak" and promotes their understanding of reciprocal communication. For example: <ul style="list-style-type: none">◆ Teacher: "Which toy would you like to play with (<i>holding one in each hand</i>)?"◆ Infant: (<i>Looks at the truck</i>)◆ Teacher: "You are looking at the truck – let's play with that one!"◆ Infant: (<i>Rolls the truck</i>)◆ Teacher: "My turn. I'm rolling the truck now (<i>as you begin pushing the truck</i>)."
KEEP IT GOING	Consider what you learned from observing infants on Monday as well as their reaction to your Focus and Scaffolds. Find ways to intentionally incorporate these strategies throughout the day.