

What you will learn in this module

How to help children with disabilities develop their language skills

Children need strong, positive relationships with adults to develop language skills. These relationships teach children about the give and take of communication. Some disabilities make it hard for children to form words. But they can learn to communicate using a combination of pictures and gestures.

How to help children with disabilities communicate effectively

Frequent conversations with adults give children a good vocabulary. They encourage skills needed for effective communication. Imaginative play teaches children the nonverbal rules of communication. Children who don't get these opportunities at home need more support at preschool.

How to help children with disabilities access a print-rich environment

Access to a print rich environment helps children link sounds to letters. Integrating literacy activities into daily activities and routines helps children recognize and recall the words. Shared reading and 'pretend' writing support the transition to written language.

You already know a lot about how young children communicate

You know that there is a relationship between language and learning.

Teachers know how to help children learn good language skills. They use these to get information. They learn how to express themselves and get their needs met.

Children with disabilities often have problems with language. They can't always use language to get their needs met. Some children can't speak. Others use sign language or a picture exchange system. Others just need more time to take in what is being said to them. Some need more time to express themselves.

You know that it is important for children to understand the rules of how to use language.

Every teacher knows it is important for children to understand what is being said. And to know how to use words to make themselves understood. They need to know how to put words in the right order. This lets other people understand what they are saying.

Using language is hard for some children with disabilities. They are so interested in people's faces or movements that they miss what is being said. Some children can't put their thoughts in order. Others don't have the words to make themselves understood.

You know the importance of participation in a print-rich environment.

Children learning to read and write need to have written words all around them. An environment that is 'print rich' gives many opportunities to make connections between sounds and letters. Children are encouraged to write down their thoughts and ideas.

Moving from oral to written language is difficult. Some children can't make the link between sounds and letter symbols. Others have problems doing things that prepare for writing — like drawing and scribbling.

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Language and relationships

Children learn to communicate from the time they are born. Their first communication is with parents or primary caregivers. When adults respond to cries and gestures, children learn that these behaviors get needs met. Eventually they learn to use words in the same way.

Children learn to use words most easily in families that have a lot of verbal communication. Adults model how to form words and then attach meaning to them. Conversations teach children the rules for combining words into sentences. They learn to change what they say based on where they are. Or to whom they are speaking. They are able to effectively communicate their feelings and needs.



When children use words effectively they learn to think and plan. They talk out loud about the concepts they are learning. They use words to monitor their own behavior. They try to understand what others think and feel. This makes it easier to form positive relationships with peers.

“It’s so exciting to watch children when they’re first learning how to use words to say how they feel or what they think,” said Ms. Walker. “They come out with the funniest things. It’s like they are parroting what their mom and dad say at home.”

“I know!” exclaimed Ms. Creegan. “I cared for this one little girl who always looked so serious every morning. When I asked her what was up, she looked me right in the eye and said, ‘I’ve got a lot on my mind!’”