

# Playing With Purpose

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## Preface

I'm Emily Cohen, and this book has evolved from my passion for helping parents and caregivers. I am a certified speech-language pathologist (SLP), and the founder of Tandem Speech Therapy, a pediatric speech therapy practice serving Austin, TX.

Every day I work with children who are experiencing developmental challenges with speech and language. Their parents and I create simple plans to help their little ones begin to flourish in their communication skills. As you read on you'll discover how we accomplish this, not through drills and regimens, but with play and wonder.

It's an extraordinary privilege that I get to watch these children find new joy with sounds and words. I see them begin to soak in understanding through interaction with the world around them. These experiences have led me on a journey of learning, of thinking, and then writing and teaching. Finally, it is distilled in this book.

This book is not been padded with a lot of superfluous information. Instead, this is a kind of field manual for parents, and for those who work with them, to get you up and running with practical tools. The tips you will find within this book stem from my experience and exposure to [The Hanen Centre](#), a Canadian non-profit organization dedicated to promoting the best possible language, social, and literacy skills in young children.

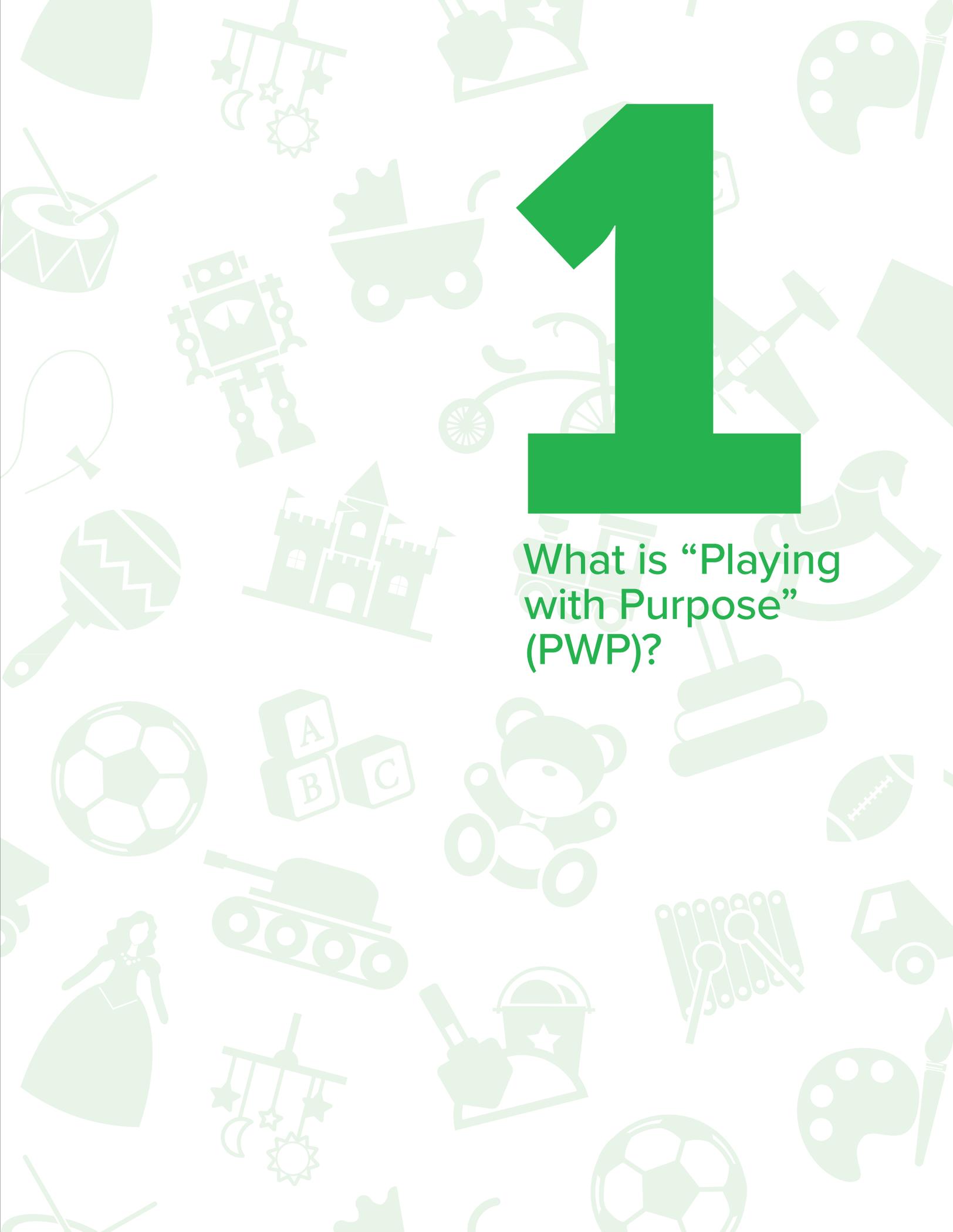
The Centre's signature program, "[It Takes Two to Talk](#)," focuses on intervention strategies that families can use with young children delayed in their speech development.

I completed my Hanen Centre training in 2014, and I'm certified to teach this extraordinarily effective philosophy to parents of children with speech disorders. It has become the foundation for all the services that we provide at Tandem.

The idea is that, as a speech therapist, I might get an hour or two a week with a child. But there are hundreds of other hours in the child's week — and there are so many things a parent or caregiver can do at home to bolster therapy's effectiveness.

And that's where this book really begins ...





# 1

What is “Playing with Purpose” (PWP)?

## What is “Playing with Purpose” (PWP)?

**Do you notice your child watching you while you move through your home? Does she sometimes cling to your leg like a barnacle on the bottom of a boat?**

Young children like to be with adults, and they're pre-wired to do so, because they have a lot to learn and gain when interacting with us. Maria Montessori taught us that children are keen observers. They learn a great deal through watching adults and mimicking our behaviors, activities, and sounds. While it may not seem like it to you, all of this is play to your child.

Playing With Purpose is about converting play and everyday routines into activities that are both fun and beneficial for children. Play can create moments of learning for your child and moments of connection together. With little tweaks to your interaction and the everyday routines you are already engaging in, you can increase opportunities for speech and language development in your child. The best part is it's not a lot of extra work!

As we explore the possibilities of Playing With Purpose in this book, I'm going to give you specific strategies to increase opportunities for speech and language development.

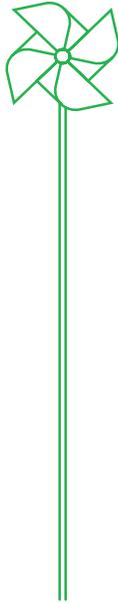
One of the clients I work with recently shared her experience in successfully turning dinner prep into Playing With Purpose. This mother happens to love to cook, and this naturally rubbed off on her daughter. The 3-year-old little girl started to adore her play kitchen, just like she saw her mom enjoying time in the real kitchen.

This mom realized what was happening and wanted to grow this new behavior into a learning and connection opportunity. Turning what is often a solitary time for both of them into an opportunity for meaningful connection only took one small adjustment. Mom moved her daughter's play kitchen out of the playroom and placed it near the family kitchen.

This transition facilitated so much growth for this family:

- The shared experience of “cooking together” allowed for the two to create a deeper connection where they could both watch, interact, and learn about each other.
- It also set the stage for a more grown-up version of cooking together in a few years' time, when the child will eventually help mom with preparing real food.
- The daughter became part of the cooking experience with her mother. She could take pride in her participation.
- The mother was able pay attention to her cooking without having to check on her daughter in another room. This made dinner prep much easier!
- Finally, the mother could have a happily-playing child while she took her time to make healthy meals for their family and do something she enjoyed as well.

As you can see Playing With Purpose does not have to be hard. Small adjustments to your day-to-day life can have a significant impact. The story above is just one example of successful, intentional play.



**Follow these suggestions to start integrating more purposeful play into your home:**

- 1. During your daily routine, allow for time face-to-face with your child.**  
This is an excellent opportunity to demonstrate basic conversation skills and gives your child a clear view of your mouth which will encourage speech.
- 2. Provide activities for your child that mimic what you're doing in the house.**  
For example, put some of your child's favorite books near the spot where you like to sit to read.
- 3. Reduce the number of toys your child has access to at any one time and think about where in your house the toys are located.**  
This decreases clutter or mess for you to clean up and decreases over-stimulation for your kids. It will encourage your child to spend more time playing with toys and free up some time for you to do the things you love.
- 4. Talk to your child all the time by narrating your day and activities.**  
Talk out-loud about what you are hearing, seeing, doing, or feeling when your child is nearby. Be sure to use slow, clear, simple words and short phrases. This will provide lots of language stimulation and vocabulary.

**Congrats!**

You are now aware of what "Playing With Purpose" is. I am excited to support you on your journey to more purposeful play as you dive into the rest of the book.

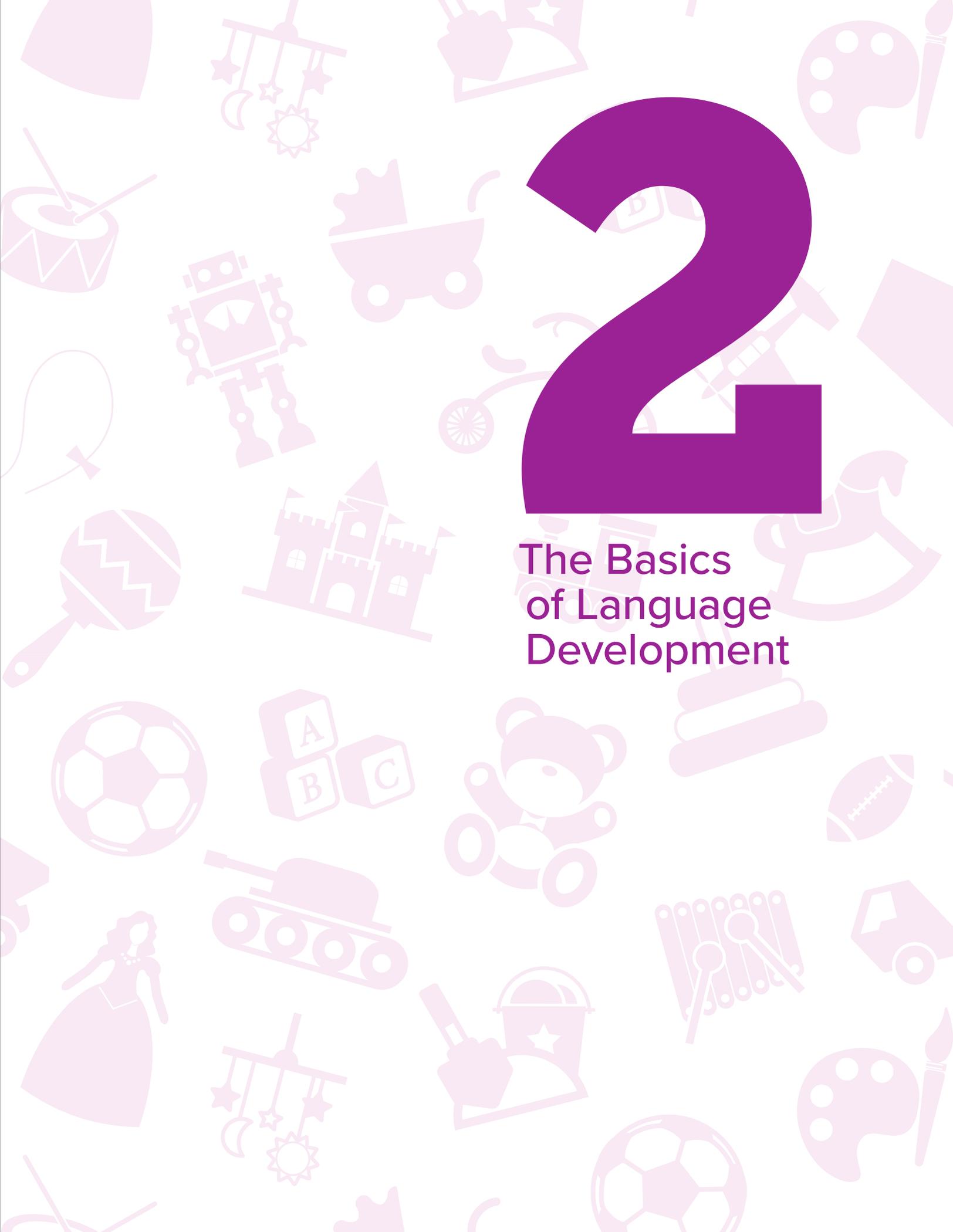
**In the next chapter** we'll take a look at the basics of language development; how a child learns to communicate, from his first babbling sounds all the way through to storytelling and dialogue. We will look at normal developmental milestones by age, so that you'll be able to identify if your child is a late talker and, if so, some steps you can take to address it.

**In Chapter 3** we'll talk about the importance that play holds in the developmental process. I will share the powerful ways that children are actually learning about speech and language while they just seem to be having fun.

**Then, in Chapters 4 and 5,** I list some great toys and activities that you can introduce into your child's playing to enhance the language development process. And then I share lots of tips that will help you keep him interested and learning.

**Finally,** you will be ready to get started right away with the tools you've been given in this book. Don't delay, it's time to play!



The background is a light purple color with a repeating pattern of various children's toys and activities. These include a drum, a mobile with stars and a moon, a hand holding a paintbrush, a palette, a crown, a toy truck, a robot, a stroller, a tricycle, a castle, a rocking horse, a ball, a ball with a zigzag pattern, a soccer ball, a teddy bear, a stack of books, a football, a tank, a girl in a dress, a hand holding a paintbrush, a bucket of paint, a xylophone, a car, a palette, and a soccer ball.

# 2

## The Basics of Language Development

## The Basics of Language Development

From birth, children are pre-programmed to develop speech and language. While this language development continues on throughout childhood and even into adolescence, the first five years are the most critical. It's during these foundational years that stimulation is so important to a child, as the brain is developing new nerve cells and multiple connections between the nerve cells.

## Developmental Milestones

Do you know what speech and language skills are developmentally appropriate for your child at his age? Get started with this chart to learn more about speech and language developmental milestones.

**4 to  
6m.**

- Moves eyes in direction of sounds
  - Responds to “no” and changes in tone of voice
  - Notices toys that make sounds
  - Recognizes voices
  - Uses sounds p, b and m in babbling
  - Smiles and laughs when spoken to
  - Vocalizes excitement and displeasure
  - Makes gurgling sounds when left alone and when playing with you
- 

**7 to  
12m.**

- Enjoys games like peek-a-boo and pat-a-cake
  - Turns and looks in direction of sounds
  - Responds to her own name
  - Recognizes words for common items such as “cup,” “shoe,” “book”
  - Begins to respond to requests (e.g. “give me”)
  - Uses a large variety of sounds in babbling
  - Uses speech or non-crying sounds to get and keep attention
  - Uses gestures to communicate (waving, holding arms to be picked up)
  - Imitates different speech sounds
  - Has 1–3 meaningful words (“hi,” “dog,” “dada,” “mama”)
- 

**1 to  
2yr.**

- Asks and answers WH-questions (“Where kitty?” “What’s that?”)
- Puts two words together (“more cookie,” “no juice,” “mommy book”)
- Is approximately 25 – 50% intelligible to strangers
- Understands “no”
- Points to body parts
- Gives a toy when asked

## 2 to 3yr.

- Understands differences in meaning (“go/stop,” “in/on,” “big/little,” “up/down”)
  - Follows 2-part commands (“Get the book and put it on the table”)
  - Understands 500 – 900+ words
  - Requests items by name
  - Uses 2 to 4 word phrases
  - Maintains topic over several conversational turns
  - Uses k, g, f, t, d, and n sounds
  - Produces 50 – 250+ words
  - Is approximately 50 – 75% intelligible
- 

## 3 to 4yr.

- Understands function of objects
  - Understands opposites
  - Follows 2 and 3-part commands
  - Answers simple “who,” “what,” “where,” and “why” questions
  - Uses language to express emotion
  - Relates recent events
  - Uses mostly nouns and verbs
  - Uses 4 – 5 word sentences
  - Usually talks easily without repeating syllables or words
  - Is approximately 80% intelligible
- 

## 4 to 5yr.

- Pays attention to a short story and answers simple questions about it
  - Uses sentences of 4 – 8 words with adult-like grammar
  - Tells stories that stay to topic
  - Communicates easily with other children and adults
  - Answers complex 2-part questions
  - Is intelligible with strangers although some sound errors may persist
- 

## 5 to 6yr.

- Accurately relays a story or an event
- Exchanges information and asks questions
- Uses sentences with details
- Follows instructions given to a group
- Asks how questions
- Begins to demonstrate sequencing abilities (e.g. days of the week)
- Answers open-ended questions (“What did you have for lunch today?”)

## Gestures: an Important Step in Communication Development

Communication is so much more than talking. In fact, a hugely important piece of communication development happens before your child says her first word.

We define a gesture as an action, or movement of part of the body, especially the hands or head, used with the intention to communicate an idea or meaning. Many gestures we do with our hands, like your daughter pointing to her cup on the counter to request it. But gestures can also be facial expressions such as your son smacking his lips indicating he wants to eat or arching his back to show he's refusing something.

In case you were wondering, encouraging your child to use gestures will not hinder speech and language development. Again, there is a strong link between gestures and communication development. For example, we know that a child who shows you or points to an object will likely learn the word for that object within 3 months. And children who produce more gestures early on have larger expressive vocabularies later in development. Additionally, research suggests that gestures pave the way for language development. In 2005, Iverson and Goldin-Meadow found that "children who first produced a gesture + word combination were also first in producing two-word combination," an essential 2-year-old milestone.

**Children will often begin using gestures as early as 8 or 9 months of age. Here are some general guidelines for gesture development:**

**9 to 12m.**

**9–12 months:**

imitates clapping, shows and gives objects to adults, reaches to be picked up, waves bye, gains attention by making physical contact like grabbing your leg, requests objects by pointing, anticipates and initiates a social game like peek-a-boo (link) by covering his face with a blanket

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**12 to 15m.**

**12–15 months:**

hugs stuffed animals, claps to show excitement, dances to music, give objects to adults to ask for help, demonstrates the functional use of objects such as brushing hair with a comb

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**15 to 18m.**

**15–18 months:**

points to get you to do something, shakes head for no, points to objects on request, indicates all done by putting hands up or shaking hands, points to objects for adults to name or label

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**18 to 24m.**

**18–24 months:**

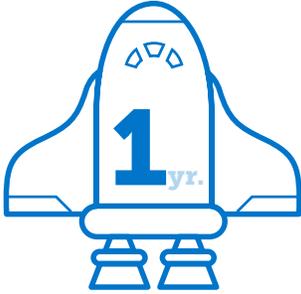
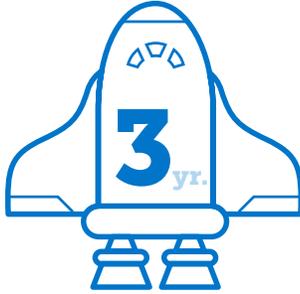
blows kisses, makes funny faces like sticking out her tongue to gain attention, slaps your palm for a "high five," shrugs shoulders or puts hands up to indicate "what's that?"

Gestures are crucial for language learning. One of the most valuable gestures for children to develop is pointing. I wrote about it, in depth, on [my blog for Tandem Speech Therapy](#). Pointing and other gestures allow a child to communicate his wants and needs months before he can produce verbal speech. Children learn communication by observing, listening, and imitating the world around them. So show your child what to do (i.e., demonstrate gesturing) when you play, talk, sing, and enjoy time together.

## The 1, 2, 3 Rule

In my work with parents, the most common questions I am asked are related to when their child should start talking. They ask me, “What is developmentally appropriate for my child?” or, “Is my child ok?”

You will find a multitude of information on the internet about speech and language development. However, I have developed a quick rule of thumb called “The 1, 2, 3 Rule.” This rule applies to both components of language— expressive language and receptive language. Expressive language refers to what is said, and receptive language refers to what is understood.

			
<b>Expressive Language</b>	Uses single (one) words: “book,” “mama,” “dog”	Uses two words together: “mama go,” “eat apple”	Uses three or more words together: “go see grandma”
<b>Receptive Language</b>	Follows one-step directions: “get the book”	Follows two-step directions: “get your shoes and take them to daddy”	Follows multi-step directions: “get your shoes and take them upstairs to your room”



If your child has not reached these milestones, then one of your first steps should be to speak with your pediatrician and contact a speech-language pathologist (SLP) like me. The American Speech-Language-Hearing Association’s [ProFind](#) tool is an excellent resource to find a licensed professional in your area.

## Is My Child a “Late Talker?”

If you searched “my 18-month-old is not talking” on Google, you would find other parents also concerned about their child’s development. You’ll read many statements like “boys talk late” or “wait and see.” This might be confusing. Your gut instinct is telling you that despite your child developing normally in every other way, he is not talking and you are asking yourself, “Is my child a late talker?”

Your concern is valid. Some children will catch up on their own, and others won’t.

So, what is considered normal development? How do you know if you should contact a speech-language pathologist?

### Who is considered a “late talker?”

A toddler (18 – 30 months) who has limited vocabulary based on his age is a late talker\*. A later talker has difficulty specifically with spoken or expressive language. Refer back to the 1, 2, 3 Rule if you are unsure whether or not your child is a late talker.

These children will have typically developing:

- play skills
- motor skills
- comprehension (receptive language)
- social skills
- thinking skills

*\*This does not include children that have physical or developmental delays such as Down Syndrome or childhood apraxia of speech.*

### Developmental milestones

Go back and refer to the chart at the beginning of this chapter.

An 18-month-old child should use at least 20 words and have different types of words in his vocabulary. This includes nouns, verbs, and social words.

A 2-year-old child should use at least 100 words and combine words into two-word phrases. The phrases should be combinations the child put together, like “eat apple,” rather than common phrases, such as “all gone.”

### Other reasons to contact an SLP:

- quiet as an infant/little babbling
- history of ear infection
- not imitating/copying words
- limited consonant sounds
- difficulty playing with peers
- family history of delayed speech
- not using gestures to communicate
- mild difficulty with comprehension/understanding



### What should you do now?

If you think your child is a late talker, then your first step should be to contact a speech-language pathologist. It’s never too early to begin intervention or even rule out concerns you may have. Research indicates the importance of early intervention for increased outcomes and long-term success. A speech-language pathologist will work together with you and your child and teach you tools to incorporate language stimulation into your everyday routines and play.

It’s also important to have your child’s hearing checked. Even a minor difficulty with hearing can impact sound, speech, and language development.

# The Importance of Vocabulary

The power of words is difficult to quantify and qualify. Words have literally altered the course of history, and they will continue to do so. We witness that on an almost daily basis in the media alone. Surely, one of the greatest tools we can provide to children is a large, rich vocabulary. It's invaluable for their long-term success in school, but also for life in general.

Not only do we need to provide children with a breadth of words, but also the skills for using those words. Being a confident communicator is a powerful tool. It allows your child to live and speak her truth, stand up for herself, and to form bonds and connections with the world around her. Communication is an amazing gift to have and to pass on to your children. It all starts with words — with increasing their vocabulary.

## What is vocabulary?

Vocabulary refers to all of the words that we know.

Expressive vocabulary, or expressive language, refers to anything you say or the words you use. For example, if I show you a picture of a ball you look at it and say the word “ball.” I could also hold up a cookie and ask, “what is this?” When you respond, “cookie,” you are using your expressive vocabulary.

Receptive vocabulary, or receptive language, refers to the words that you understand. For example, if I ask you to point to a picture of a dinosaur in a book, then you can scan the page and find the dinosaur to show me. We use vocabulary (both receptive and expressive) for listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

## Why is having a large vocabulary important?

Research has shown that it is important to encourage a child's vocabulary development, so she develops the literacy and language skills necessary to succeed in school. As the parent, primary caregiver, or teacher in a child's life, you play an integral role in helping a child learn new words. By narrating your daily activities, in everyday conversation, and through engagement with your child, you expose her to new and unfamiliar words. This exposure helps expand a child's vocabulary. Did you know that having a large vocabulary helps children think and learn about the world, and that the more words a child knows the more information she can access?

When teaching a child new words, it's important to focus on one word at a time. It is also important to choose vocabulary for something that she frequently sees in her daily routine or a word you find yourself saying a lot when you speak to your child.

Perhaps your child is interested in books, so you decide your new target word will be “book.” If you focus on one specific and relevant word at a time, your child will learn faster, and you will be able to teach more words in a shorter amount of time. We know from research that a child must first understand a word before we will hear her use it in her speech.

When teaching the new word, start by pointing out the object whenever you see it. You can say, “Look, I have a book.” Then you can move on to your child identifying the object. Hold up two different objects and ask your child to, “point to the book.” Always provide lots of praise and positive reinforcement. I like offering specific praise. For example, you could say, “I like how you showed me the book.”

## 8 Steps to Take If You Suspect a Speech-Language Delay

It's ok to ask for help! It takes a village to raise a child. No one expects you to know everything, or even where you should start, when you are concerned about your child's speech and language skills. I hear from parents all the time that are unsure of developmental milestones, or who they should be talking with about their concerns.

Let me break it down and provide you with the steps you can and should take if you suspect your child is having communication difficulty. Don't get bogged down with the whole list and think you need to do it all. Baby steps are the key. Try picking one or two steps to focus on at a time.

### 1. Early intervention is key!

Lots of speech and language deficits can be remediated very quickly and others take time. You want to get started working with a local speech-language pathologist soon. Even if you are unsure if your child is having difficulty, call an SLP and ask. Give them your child's name, her age, and explain your concerns. The SLP will make recommendations and help you schedule an evaluation if it's the correct course of action.

### 2. Find out what public school district you live in and contact them to see who handles speech-language evaluations.

Another great place to start is with a local university's speech and hearing center or with a local speech-language pathologist.

### 3. Contact your pediatrician and voice your concerns.

Your pediatrician has likely had a few interactions with you and your child. She has asked you before about your child's speech and language skills as part of your routine visits, so she already has a sense of her abilities. If you feel like your concerns are not addressed, then reach out to one of the resources I've mentioned above in steps one and two.

Another option to be aware of is that, if under the age of 3, your child may qualify for free services through the county or state you live in. These services are specifically called Early Childhood Intervention (ECI). To see who provides ECI services for your area go to Google and type in your zip code and "early childhood intervention."

### 4. Record video samples of your child attempting to communicate.

This can be extremely useful when you speak to a professional. In my experience, we are not always able to get a full picture of your child's abilities in an hour-long evaluation session.

- Get clear video clips with your child's face/mouth in sight.
- Have a few on hand at your first appointment with a professional in case your child gets shy or hesitant around an unfamiliar person.
- Take the videos at the times your child is most communicative. This can often be when she is playing with her favorite toy.



#### **5. Take notes and make a list of the words and phrases you hear your child say.**

This will help the professional determine the types of vocabulary your child is using and know what sounds she is using too.

If your child is producing speech that may be difficult for an unfamiliar person to understand, then make notes about this too. Some children may start to say “wa-wa” for water. Write these kinds of things down in your notes.

#### **6. Join a local mom’s group — either one that meets in person or online.**

Other moms have been through this before and a group can be an excellent resource for professionals, advice, and support. You can also find loads of helps from mommy bloggers who share their experiences online. Just run a quick Google search.

#### **7. Notice the communicative opportunities you are giving your child.**

As a parent or caregiver, it’s common to want to anticipate all the needs of your child. While this is an excellent parenting skill, it is less than ideal for children who are delayed in their communication. Creating opportunities for your child to explore and try new communication skills is crucial to their development. The professional you choose to work with can provide you with tools to enhance your child’s communication skills. In my practice I use the Hanen method for teaching caregivers communication tools.

#### **8. Most importantly ... trust your gut!**

The old adage says, “Mother knows best.” And in most cases that is true. You know your child the best and are her #1 advocate. If you are not happy or comfortable with advice you receive, then get a second opinion. The more you ask and learn, the more equipped you will be to help your child.

Providing your child with opportunities for language development does not have to be complicated. Play can create moments of learning for your child and moments of connection for you both. With little tweaks to the play time, and even the everyday routines you are already engaging in, you can increase opportunities for speech and language development in your child.



# 3

## The Importance of Play



## The Importance of Play

So much more is going on in a child when she is playing than we can even imagine. It's not just a matter of passing the time and amusing herself. Play is a human being's first steps of learning about her world. It's so essential, in fact, that it can be observed as a universal experience. All over the world, in every kind of cultural setting, whether raised in privilege or poverty, children instinctively play.

*Maria Montessori once said, "Play is the work of the child."*

Think about that. From a young age, play is your child's occupation. It is how children interact in and with their environment, discover their interests, and acquire and grow cognitive, motor, and social-emotional skills. When children play, whether with other children or with adults, they learn to problem solve, and they learn how to get along with others.

Playtime is also where they start learning how to use language and communicate effectively. They are learning language skills all the time.

## Learning Language Through Play

As play and play skills develop, children develop. First, babies explore by putting everything in their mouths or perhaps by throwing toys. Next, as toddlers, they build with blocks or play with cars and trains. They soon learn that objects have names, that you can play with them in a variety of ways, and that different toys and items can go together.

Whether the play is free and unstructured, or directed and very purposeful, it is a dynamic and lifelong process that provides opportunities to communicate and express. As a parent, caregiver, or pediatric speech-language pathologist, each time you engage in these activities with children, you facilitate and reinforce the growth of skills across several areas of development.

## Here are the 5 ways children learn speech and language skills during play:



### 1. Children WATCH.

Starting as an infant, your child watches your mouth as you talk. Your child watches your body language and facial expressions when you speak, communicate, and interact with others. Your child also watches how you, his siblings, and his peers play with each other. All of this information — the movements of speech, expressions, and action — get stored away for use later.



### 2. Children LISTEN.

While your child is watching you, she is also listening. Listening begins even earlier than watching. Since prenatal development, in fact, your child has been taking in sounds. Children listen to the variety of sounds we make, how we combine them into words, and the phrases or sentences we form. The more opportunity your child has to hear different words and types of words, the more words she will be able to access when she begins to imitate.



### 3. Children EXPLORE.

Watching and listening are key components of language development, but play becomes especially important during the exploration phase. During playtime, children explore and manipulate things around them. Your involvement and participation in your child's play is also a key component of language development during this stage.

Imagine playing with blocks with your child. As you put a block on top of your tower, you say "Block on." When you clean up the blocks and place a block in its tub, you say "Block in." Your child is now learning the words for "on" and

"in." The exploration phase happens throughout childhood, as does your important role in supporting language development.



### 4. Children IMITATE.

As your child watches and listens, he begins to imitate your actions and the sounds he hears around him. Early on, your child begins to mimic gross motor movements such as clapping and waving. This is a precursor to speech and language imitation and indicates an understanding of communication.

Speech imitation starts with the coos that you can hear in your child's first few months. Then, it progresses to babbling and later to real words. The time you spend in play with your child, narrating your actions and his actions, creates authentic language learning opportunities for your child.



### 5. Children CREATE and FORMULATE.

The skills your child has been working on and building — watching, listening, exploring/playing, and imitating — eventually come together. This combination allows your child to create and formulate her own words, sentences, and thoughts. Next, your child begins to use language for a purpose. Children use language to express wants and needs, share information, engage with peers, and ask questions. They create and formulate new ideas and sentences, using language to share and communicate. The more they do this, with you and with others, the more independent they become in their language and communicative abilities.

## Play The Hanen Way

The Hanen Centre is a Canadian non-profit organization that provides workshops and trainings to speech-language pathologists and other childcare professionals. They are dedicated to promoting the best possible language, social, and literacy skills in young children. The Hanen Centre was founded more than 35 years ago by SLP Ayala Hanen Manolson when she developed a program that educated parents, in groups, on how to provide intensive intervention to their children at home during play and everyday activities. This was a departure from the traditional 1:1 intervention we often provide to kids with language delays.

I was introduced to The Hanen Centre's methods during my first job post-graduate school and eventually was trained in their "It Takes Two to Talk" program. The goal of this program is to train you, as the caregiver, to be the interventionist. It is also the basis for all my work as a private speech-language pathologist and in developing the idea of Playing With Purpose.

Learning to play the Hanen way or to Play With Purpose is incredibly valuable for our children. Children learn to communicate during play and everyday activities with the important people in their lives. That means, you are the key to your child's success! The Hanen Centre taught me to recognize that as a caregiver you have many more opportunities to interact with your child in a meaningful way. You are your child's first teacher.

### **When you play the Hanen way, you are able:**

- To build language learning into every part of your child's day
- Motivate your child to communicate and help her develop more mature communication skills
- Use play and daily activities that are familiar and significant to your child as a catalyst for language development
- Provide support to your child on an ongoing basis in your child's comfortable surroundings

As you continue to read this book, you will find many references to The Hanen Centre's work. In my years as a Hanen-trained speech-language pathologist I have found that when I empower parents to help their child AND they have been able to provide quality interactions within everyday moments, the child makes progress or learns new skills. It's that simple. This does not require any fancy, expensive materials. Playing With Purpose (or playing the Hanen way) is about bringing intentionality to your interactions with children. In the chapters that follow, you'll learn concrete tips and tricks so you can start today.

### **Resources:**

[It Takes Two to Talk book](#)

[Research Summary](#) for ITTT Program

## The Power Of Play

Again, play is more than recreation for your child. It is how she learns about the world. She learns to problem solve, build executive functioning skills, use language, learns to take the perspective of others, and forms relationships. Play also develops the social skills we use to learn from, relate to, play with, and teach each other. More importantly, play helps your child build her social and emotional intelligence. Those are skills such as delayed gratification, understanding and appreciating how others feel and how to express or deal with emotions.

There are many important, life-long skills we see in children who have high social emotional intelligence. They are able to communicate their desires, needs, and ideas. These children are able to solve problems through compromise and negotiation skills. Children with high social emotional intelligence make thoughtful choices, express curiosity, demonstrate self-confidence, and are able to employ calming strategies during stressful moments.

Often during play children must learn to delay gratification. They learn to wait their turn when sharing toys or during a game. In pretend play, children will test different roles and relationships. Think about your kids pretending to play

house. Sometimes your daughter wants to play mommy and other times she wants to be the baby. This builds perspective taking skills — knowing that other people will have different beliefs, intentions and thoughts than you may have. During play, children will learn self-control and self-regulation. They learn that you cannot go around hitting friends or yanking a toy out of another child's hands. In other words, play is a great teacher.

Now, with this foundational understanding of how your child learns language through play, you are probably wondering how you can help your child expand her speech and language skills through play. Here are several easy to use resources for selecting toys and to get you started right away. We'll expand on these and add more in the pages that follow.



## 5 Principles for Choosing Toys (Batteries NOT Required!)

Children learn by doing. Your child may have dragged you down the toy aisle at Target recently, so you could both be bombarded by toys with sounds, lights, music, buttons, and the dreaded screens. When you purchase these types of toys, the toy does all the work. This means your child is not building any of her skills. She is not *doing*; the toy is doing.

Next time you are shopping for your child or a birthday party gift, keep these five principles in mind and choose a toy that will support the development of critical early language and play skills.

### 1. Skip the batteries.

If the toy requires batteries, then you probably do not want it. Or, if it does take batteries, remove them. Many years ago, as a new speech-language pathologist, I bought a farm set. The toy set itself was great. However, the barn had batteries so that it could make noises. I took the batteries out. You don't need the barn to make noises. You want your child to make the noises. Animal sounds such as "moo-moo" for the cow are often some of the first words we hear from children.

### 2. Go back to the basics.

Try choosing traditional toys. Think back to some of the toys you had as a child: wooden blocks, cars, a play kitchen and food set, a dollhouse, play dough, dress-up clothes, a tool set, etc. These are all "open-ended" toys. They are toys that have no beginning, middle, or end. They can be used in a variety of ways and allow your child creative freedom in how to use and manipulate them.

### 3. Get outside and move.

It is so important to get kids moving, even when they are indoors. Whether you are playing inside or outside, you do not have to buy specific toys to get kids' bodies moving. Head to the park or build a fort or a tunnel with the sofa cushions and a blanket. When you build a fort, you can work on skills such as: naming actions, problem-solving, building vocabulary and basic concepts (i.e., on, under, off, inside, outside, build, stack, crawl), and sequencing steps or recalling the sequence of events.

### 4. Less is more.

You have likely seen photos in magazines of the quintessential playroom. It is piled high with endless toys and games for children. Your child does NOT need toys upon toys. In fact, too many toys can be overwhelming. When children have too many toys, they end up moving quickly from one toy to another which can limit their play and language opportunities and contribute to decreased attention.

If your child has just had a birthday or the holiday season is over, consider a toy rotation. This is an excellent way to reduce clutter and stay organized. Start by dividing your toys into sets, leave one set out, store the other set, and then rotate them whenever you would go shopping for something new.

## 5. YOU are the best toy.

As mentioned above, you do not always need to go out and buy toys. Sometimes the best toys are not actual toys at all. Pots, wooden spoons, cardboard boxes, homemade forts, or a bucket and cup for water play can be the best things for your child to play with. Your child can be creative, and you can enhance the opportunities for creative expression and play.

Think outside the box, and get down on the floor and interact with each other. Sing with your child, play pat-a-cake, talk in a funny voice, tell stories, be silly, play hide-and-seek, teach your child finger plays, or play a lap game. Interaction is the basis for communication.

Never forget it...



### Five Tips to Get You Started Playing With Purpose TODAY:

- Allow for face-to-face time with your child.
- Provide activities for your child that mimic the activities you're doing in the house.
- Reduce the number of toys your child has access to.
- Talk to your child all the time by narrating your day and activities.
- Use my favorite Hanen strategy called "Offer a Little Bit...Then Wait."

This strategy is part of what is referred to as creating an opportunity for your child to lead. The desire to communicate needs to come from within. Try taking the focus off getting your child to talk. When you ask your child to say words or repeat after you, it does not help him learn language. It may have the opposite effect since it can take the joy out of communicating.

Instead of asking children to repeat, we can let them lead the communication and then follow their lead. But sometimes we need to encourage or create an opportunity for a child to lead. That is where this Hanen strategy comes into play.

I like to use toys with many parts or keep my toys in clear, plastic bins when "offering a little bit and then waiting." I can repeat this strategy over and over during a single play routine. And we all know that repetition provides multiple opportunities for our children to communicate and for us to reinforce their excellent communication.





## Toys for Playing with Purpose

I want to dive in deeper now, and get really practical. Remember my friend who used her daughter's play kitchen to connect with her in a whole new way and open up some powerful learning? That's just one great example of how you can use a simple plaything — one that's found in most homes where there's a little girl.

So, what follows is a list of more toys that are wonderful for language learning. You can easily transform them all into engaging teaching tools as you and your child Play With Purpose.

**Please note:** Under each of these recommended toys, I'll also give you some tips for how to start using them to develop your child's language skills. Not all of these tips are equally appropriate for every age group. It varies depending on each child's developmental stage and abilities. As you read through them, you'll know which toys and which tips are a best match for your little one.

## Everyday Items

Before we begin to talk about some toys that you may want to go and buy, what about some common household items that you probably already have laying around? Things that may not be toys at all, in the traditional sense, but kids love to play with them anyway.

I am going to guess this is a familiar scenario. Your child receives a gift that arrives in a large shipping box. You are both so excited to open the present from grandma, but then your child proceeds to be more interested in playing with the giant cardboard box than the lovely train set they just received. Why? Because sometimes, the best toys are not toys at all.

These everyday items may be the things your child will play with for more prolonged periods of time. You may see him engage in more creative play with these non-toys and they cost you less money. Everyday items are the toys that allow your child to be curious and explore, which provides for many opportunities also to stimulate and boost his speech and language skills.



## Top 3 Tips for Playing With Purpose Using Everyday Items:

### 1 Paper towel tubes

These tubes, destined for your recycling bin, can become binoculars, a tunnel for small cars or balls, or a megaphone. Try playing an “I Spy” game using your tube like a scope. This is a fun game to play and will help your child build her vocabulary and use of descriptive terms (also known as adjectives). Start by demonstrating how the game works and describe something for your child, then see if she can find it. For example, say “I spy something yellow that tastes tart, and is a fruit.” Adapt your descriptions to your child’s skill level. If your child is beginning to learn her shapes and colors, then use a lot of those in your clues.

### 2 Empty containers or boxes

Our little ones, aged 1 to 2 years, love any toy that they can pull, push, fill-up, and dump. Any empty box or container meets these criteria. Use your food storage containers, a large diaper box, tissue boxes, a zip-topped bag, water bottles, or any old plastic bin. Whether your child is the object that gets moved around or another one of his toys, play a game to highlight prepositions or location words. Some of the words I like to highlight are in, out, on, up, off, and under which all happen to start with vowel sounds. Vowel sounds are some of the earliest sounds we hear our kids say. By making intentional choices for vocabulary, you are increasing the chances your child can and will imitate your words. Take your child’s block and repeat the phrase “put in” as you repeatedly place blocks in an empty box. Then say the phrase “take out” as the blocks get removed.

### 3 Plastic cups

Not only do children love to see themselves in a mirror, but they like to hear their voice. Talking into a plastic cup will provide an interesting echo and amplify your child’s sounds. Instead of buying a microphone, you can pull out one of the many leftover cups from your child’s birthday party or a family BBQ. With this plastic cup game, you can encourage your child to imitate sounds and words and also practice turn-taking. Start by taking the cup and speaking something into it. Animal sounds like “moo-moo” or “baa-baa” are fun while playing with your farm toy or a puzzle to give them more context. You could also say silly sound combinations or nonsense words. The sillier you are, the more likely you are to engage your child. Then pass the cup over and wait for your child to imitate you. Also, highlight “my turn” and “your turn” for some social language building.

#### ***There is no set definition of a toy.***

A toy can be anything. Often the best toy is the item your child is most interested in engaging with. Again, let me remind you that sometimes that toy is YOU! When we join our children during play by tapping into their interests, we can teach them the most. You can keep your child engaged and learning by:

- Imitating what your child does with the play object.
- After you have mirrored your child, do something new and pause to see if your child then imitates you. (Remember: children learn through imitation)
- Providing a sound, a word, or a short phrase to add language to the interaction. Talk about what you see the child doing.
- Pretending your object does not work like the child’s object does and have him help you.

## Mr. Potato Head

Mr. Potato Head is my all-time favorite toy to use with preschoolers, providing endless opportunities for language stimulation. He can help teach tons of vocabulary and SO many language concepts. He is great for working on:

- body part names
- clothing item names
- color concepts
- locations in/out or on/off
- asking/answering questions
- social skills
- collaborative play
- following directions
- object labeling and identification
- expanding sentence length
- action words (verbs)

I recommend buying a Mr. Potato Head set that comes with lots of parts. It is also a great value and provides a lot of variety. These sets are nice because they come with a tub or suitcase which makes storage easy.

Having a Mr. Potato Head with many parts allows you to provide multiple opportunities to practice the same skill. And repetition is key for young kids acquiring a new skill of any kind.

### Top 5 Tips for Playing With Purpose Using Mr. Potato Head

#### **1** Use the Hanen strategy.

To help your child make requests, “Offer a Little Bit...Then Wait.” Sit across from your child and place the parts for Mr. Potato Head in your lap, just out of his reach. Be sure your child has seen that you placed the parts in your lap. Start by giving your child the potato head and maybe one additional part. Then wait for your child to ask for more. Be sure to look at him expectantly so he knows you want him to do something. Pay attention to all different types of communication attempts. It may be a glance at the toys in your lap, your child may point to the part he wants, or he may use a single word or phrase to make a request.

Any communication should be rewarded by immediately giving your child another Mr. Potato Head piece and with verbal praise. If your child is having difficulty making a request try offering him a choice. Hold up two Mr. Potato Head pieces and ask, “Would you like the hat or the eyes?” This play routine can be completed to build a complete Mr. Potato Head which may provide you and your child at least 10 opportunities to engage in a communication exchange.

#### **2** Mr. Potato Head is great to use for working on following directions.

Give your child the potato head and place a bunch of parts on the floor in front of her. Decide how many directions your child can follow at a time and give her a task. You could start by saying, “Put the hat on Mr. Potato Head.” or “Put the yellow shoes on Mr. Potato Head.” A more complicated two-step direction might sound like, “First put on the hat, and then put on the blue arms.” Take it up one more notch and have your child give you the directions. She will love having the tables turned and getting to be in charge!

### **3** If you are lucky enough to have more than one Mr. Potato Head set then you're able to work on the concept of same and different.

Build two Mr. Potato Heads with only one or two parts that are different, then talk about how they look the same and how they are different. You can turn this into an "I Spy" type game where your child has to find the one difference between the two Mr. Potato Heads.



**IDEA:** [The Mr Potato Head Super Hero Collector Pack](#) includes multiple potato heads, so your child can talk about differences in costume colors or the accessories that the different characters get to carry.

### **4** You can help facilitate cooperative play between your child and another using Mr. Potato Head.

Start by giving one of the children just the potato head, and the other child the bucket with all the parts. One child will have to initiate with his friend to get the parts they need to build his Mr. Potato Head. You can also work on making comments after a friend has asked for an item. Modeling phrases is a good tool to help your child if he is having trouble making a comment. You could say, "I see Jack put the blue eyes on Mr. Potato Head." If your child imitates your words, then be sure to praise him for using a great sentence. Maybe on his next turn he will use a phrase on his own.

### **5** Use Mr. Potato Head to work on action words (verbs).

Being able to combine nouns with verbs is the basis for developing sentence structure. Think back to when you learned grammar in elementary school. Often the first phrases we hear from children are combinations of nouns and verbs such as "eat cookie" or "car go." Well Mr. Potato Head can do all sorts of things. He can: jump, walk, run, dance, sleep, eat, fall, break, etc.

So, get Mr. Potato Head moving. Try this routine to work on action words: start by telling your child, "Make Mr. Potato Head jump." And then wait for your child to move Mr. Potato Head around like he is jumping. Then ask, "What is Mr. Potato Head doing?" Your child may say jump, jumping, or even a short phrase like potato jump. You can follow up by using a technique called recasting and say, "Mr. Potato Head is jumping on the table." This provides a model for using correct grammar to tell the same message your child was giving.



## Ball Poppers

Several years ago I learned about ball poppers. I was working with a fantastic occupational therapist in her the clinic, and she had purchased the [cow ball popper](#) to work on fine motor skills. I quickly learned that this was not useful just for occupational therapists. I found myself using the ball popper with almost all of my patients. No matter how old they were or where they were in speech and language development, I could turn this toy into many speech and language building opportunities.

Ball popper toys are super engaging and reinforcing for children. If you're unfamiliar with the popper, they are small plastic figures that "pop" out a small ball when you squeeze them. They come in a ton of different character and animal options, so there is bound to be one that piques your child's interests. And they are inexpensive at less than \$10 each. They can keep kids from preschool-age and up through the elementary years amused and are incredibly small and portable. As a traveling pediatric speech therapist, this makes them all winners in my book.

Ball popper toys are not only for the older children you have. They are also great for kids as young as 9 months old. Ball poppers for younger kiddos simply look and function a bit differently since your child will not have the fine motor skills to squeeze the popper. When you use a ball popper with a younger child, you can work on: counting, labeling or identifying colors, basic requesting such as asking for "more" or "again," and simple turn-taking for pushing the button to activate the toy.

Another toy that I love, which is similar to a ball popper, is the [Elefun Game](#). It is a fantastic game for early turn-taking and categorizing with children ages 3 and up.



## Top 5 Tips for Playing With Purpose using a Ball Popper

### **1 Target practice is a fun game to play with a ball popper.**

I use this with kids who are practicing new speech sounds, but it's perfect for almost any new skill that requires repetition. Draw a target on a piece of paper and stick it up on any door. I use "2 points" in the center, "5 points" for the middle, and "10 points" in the outside ring. Then let your child use the ball popper toy to hit the target. Whatever number the ball is closest to dictates how many times your kiddo has to practice the target word or skill. I give families word lists to practice. If your child is a reader, then let her try the words on her own. If not, then provide a model.

### **2 Use the ball popper to practice object naming, vocabulary, and simple requests.**

A ball popper is an excellent tool for early communicators. It's amazing how much language you can target with this simple toy. For example, I hold on to the popper toy and work on vocabulary or requesting with words such as "ball," "pop," "again," "my turn," "squeeze," and "push." When working with young children, it's especially important to reinforce their communication attempts immediately. The balls are the reinforcement. As soon as a child communicates, you should reward him/her (i.e. give a ball or a squeeze) and give specific verbal praise. This may sound like, "I love how you asked me for a ball."

### **3 Incorporate ball poppers into games that teach the skill of following directions.**

For example, you could say, "Stand up and pop the toy," which is a two-step direction. For children working on multi-step directions, I start by placing the balls around the room. Then I give a direction such as, "Pick up the ball under the chair, jump two times, and then shoot the ball at the door."

### **4 Prepositions or location words are concepts I typically begin teaching around 3 – 4 years old.**

Playing with ball poppers intentionally can enhance both expressive (use of words) and receptive (comprehension) language skills. When kids pop the ball, parents can ask questions such as "Where did the ball land?" Children will then use their preposition words to tell you if the ball landed "next to" the chair, "behind" the sofa, or "under" the table. This is the expressive language task. If you want to work on comprehension or receptive language, then give a direction like, "shoot the ball under the table." If the ball lands where you directed, then this demonstrates an understanding of the concept "under."

### **5 I also use ball popper toys as a general reinforcer.**

My older kids like to earn the balls from the popper when we are working on categories. We start by choosing a category and each time the child names a member of the group, she earns a ball. Naming to categories can be as simple as, "Tell me some farm animals." Or can be more complex like, "Tell me six foods that are cold." Working to name six items per category is an appropriate goal for kids aged 4 to 6. Once she earns all of the balls, the popping fun begins.

## Cars

There is no denying it, children love to play with cars. Many days, I walk into a family's home for therapy, and I see cars strewn about their play area. Cars are versatile and an excellent vehicle (no pun intended) for speech and language development.

You likely spend a good amount of time each day forced to sit together with your family in the car. Using cars for Playing With Purpose is not left for the toys alone; you can use your family's car rides to expand skills too.

Picture yourself in the car. You and your kids are traveling from place to place. But what are you doing? Perhaps listening to music, playing electronics, or talking. You can amp up that drive by also practicing speech! Your biggest job in the car is driving, and your focus should be on that. But why not use that time to engage your child in practice that will encourage speech and language growth.

Some of the skills you can work on with cars at home or on the road include categories, speech sounds, prepositions, vocabulary, fluency (also referred to as stuttering), descriptive words, sequencing, answering and asking questions, the list could go on.

Remember to stick to the basics when you are looking to buy cars for your children. Children learn by doing. Toy cars provide many opportunities for your kids to get down on the floor and interact, create, and move. Another reminder: get down on the floor with your toddler. Spend time in a face-to-face interaction. This is particularly beneficial for young children still acquiring language. They will be able to see your face and mouth which gives them increased opportunities to imitate. Your child must be able to see your mouth and hear your words to learn them and imitate.

### Top 3 Tips for Playing With Purpose Using Cars

#### **1 Use cars to work on following directions.**

This is particularly easy if your kids have a car track set. Give your child instructions on how to build the road. For example, you could say, "First get the blue ramp and connect it to the red track." If you do not have a car track set, then you can also work on following directions with the other toys and items nearby. Give directions for creating a ramp, locations to drive, and a place to make a parking lot.

#### **2 If your child is experiencing difficulty with fluent speech, cars are an excellent tool to describe types of speech.**

Talk about bumpy speech and smooth speech. Use a toy car and find something to make the car run on a smooth surface and one that is bumpy. One suggestion is to pour a bit of rice out on the table for the bumpy speech and the clean table for the smooth speech. You can also focus on fast and slow speech. Practice driving or pushing you can fast and then slow it down. Follow this up by practicing fast speech and slow speech.

#### **3 If your child is having difficulty speaking, you can use cars to work on imitating sounds.**

This is useful for all types of vehicles, not only cars. The vehicle sounds or environmental sounds are often easy for kids to say because they contain only vowels or early developing consonants. While playing with the cars, show your kiddo how to make different sounds for each one. The car can say "vooom," the firetruck can say "eee ooo eee ooo," and the train can say "oo oo" or "choo-choo." Don't worry if your child doesn't imitate you right away. He may need to hear you making the sounds many times before he attempts to mimic any himself. But stick with it, use the same noises every time you play with vehicles and he may begin to imitate.

## Top 3 Tips for Playing With Purpose While in the Car

### 1 It should come as no surprise, that 'I Spy' is a fun and excellent game to play while in the car.

Use it to work on vocabulary and descriptive terms. For an older child (ages 4 and up), describe something for him and see if he can guess what it is. For example, say "I spy something red, that's an octagon, and has the letters s-t-o-p on it." You can adapt your descriptions to your child's skill level. If your child is just beginning to work on colors and shapes, you might use a lot of those in your descriptions. However, if your child is older and working on learning adjectives and more complex language, you can include more of those in your descriptions.

### 2 If your child is working on mastering new speech sounds, play a word hunt game while driving in the car.

Challenge your kiddo to find ten or twenty things outside she sees that have the same speech sound. If your child is at an age where she can write, then supply her with paper and a pencil to keep a list of the words. This is handy for practicing later when you're not driving. After your child has found a word and shared it, then repeat it back to the child while highlighting or emphasizing the target sound. Consider a challenge! Ask her to use the word in a sentence.

### 3 Use your time in the car to talk about where you are going and what you are going to do there.

This can be on your weekly trip to the grocery or while on a road trip. If you're driving for a vacation, you can talk about what you packed and why you needed the individual items (i.e., You're going to the beach, so you packed sunscreen to protect your skin.) and what activities you will do on the trip. You can discuss the sequence of your day while driving and then have your child recall the steps as you move through them. Engaging in authentic conversations are so valuable for language learning.



# Play Dough

Play dough is excellent to use for speech and language stimulation because it is inexpensive, fun, and can be used to work on almost any skill. Kids of all ages enjoying digging in, not just preschoolers! Play dough comes in many different forms. There is the name brand [Play-Doh](#), but you can also find great recipes to make your own. I especially like [Kinetic Sand](#), [Model Magic](#), or a newer product I just learned about called [Mad Matter](#). No matter which of these you and your children pick out, you are destined to have fun and learn in the process.

Play dough can be used with young children to build early language skills. It can be used to help children improve their speech sound production or to work on phonology skills. Play dough is a fun tool for skills like sequencing, following directions, and answering WH-questions. Simultaneously, play dough is perfect to help kids with sensory and attention challenges, to improve play and fine motor skills, as well as to encourage creativity.

## Top 10 Tips for Playing With Purpose Using Play Dough

- 1 Use play dough balls on the table to illustrate multi-syllable words.**

Multi-syllable words can be challenging for little mouths to coordinate. Often kids leave out parts of a word. The child can squish his finger into the balls as he says each syllable. Practicing the word “hamburger,” make three little balls and squish-squish-squish.
- 2 Use simple shape cutters and a rolling pin to make playdough cookies.**

When the child has finished building his cookie, have him retell the sequence or the steps. Encourage the child to talk about what he did first, next, and last so you can build a matching cookie.
- 3 Target following directions by giving specific cookie decorating instructions.**

For example, “Roll some pink playdough into a ball and put in on top of your cookie.” Vary the number of instructions you give based on your child’s skill level. If extra assistance is needed, try drawing a picture of the cookie design to provide a visual cue.
- 4 For kids just beginning to talk, I suggest using a Hanen strategy.**

Take a tub of play dough and place it in front of the child, but do not open it. Can you guess why you would not open the container, knowing the child cannot do it himself? It provides an opportunity for communication or initiation. In this instance, I would model the sound “oh” to represent open or the word “open.” Then wait for his communication attempt and reinforce the child by opening the container.
- 5 Activities with play dough are rich with vocabulary opportunities.**

You can highlight verbs such as roll, cut, squeeze, push, smash, open, close, and take out. You might model descriptive words for size, shape, quantity, and color.

## **6 Use play dough to illustrate bumpy versus smooth speech for children who are working on improving their fluency or decreasing stuttering.**

Make a bumpy/wiggly line out of playdough on the table and a smooth/straight line next to it. Then you can talk about and model the different types of speaking as you trace the line with your finger.

## **7 Play dough is a great behavior reinforcement tool.**

It can help keep fidgety hands busy, so your child can focus on listening to a story. Give your child a small blob of play dough before you begin reading, along with instructions to keep it in her hand and squish it quietly while listening. If your school-aged child is struggling to pay attention in class, consider discussing this idea with her classroom teacher.

## **8 Barrier games are a fun way to work on clear and concise sentence formulation as well as descriptive words.**

Put up a barrier (such as a book or a folder) between you and your child. If this is a new concept, I suggest you model with the first turn. Mold something out of your playdough and then use simple sentences to describe it to the child. See if he can use his play dough to build the same item. Compare and discuss your creations at the end.

## **9 If your child is working with a pediatric speech therapist on specific speech sounds, play dough is a fun activity to use with homework words.**

Use play dough to build objects that start with the target sound. For example, you can build items that begin with /s/-blends like a “snake,” “stop sign,” “star,” “steps,” “school,” etc.

## **10 Pick your favorite homemade play dough recipe and make it with your child.**

This will be a great opportunity to connect and spend quality time with your child. Plus, recipes target following directions and sequencing. Then use your new creation in any of the activities described above!



## Blocks

Blocks come in all shapes and sizes. There are cardboard blocks, wooden blocks, and colored blocks. You can make blocks from old Tupperware or turn an Amazon box into a block shape sorter. There are brands such as Lincoln Logs, Lego, and Topamino. Just like there are many types of blocks, there are many ways you can use your blocks for Playing With Purpose.

**Here are just some of the language, cognitive and other skills that your children can learn by playing with blocks:**

- Preposition concepts such as on, under, next to, in front, behind, top, bottom, on, off, and between
- Color and shape concepts
- Letter and Number concepts (if you are using blocks with letters/numbers)
- Size concepts and counting skills
- Problem-solving skills (i.e., How to create a stable tower that won't fall down)
- Hand-eye coordination, fine motor skills, and visual processing
- Cause and effect relationships
- Sharing, cooperation, problem-solving skills and more while building blocks with friends
- Math and science principles like gravity and balance

**Some food for thought:** plain blocks are my favorite to use with the younger children I work with. Not the blocks that usually have letters and numbers on them (ABCs and 123s). They are not great for our little ones learning to use and build early language. Many adults will go straight to trying to teach letters and numbers to children who are not developmentally ready to learn that information. Until a child has a well-established spontaneous vocabulary of at least 50 words, we don't even want to think about those kinds of concepts. We want to save those ideas for later, after a child has learned other words he can use in everyday life.



## Top 5 Tips for Playing With Purpose Using Blocks

### **1** Blocks can be combined with another toy set and used for symbolic play.

Symbolic play is the ability to use objects, actions or ideas to represent other objects, actions, or ideas in play. For example, a child may push a block around the floor as a car or put it to his ear as a cell phone. If your child uses his blocks to build a house, then grab some of his favorite characters or action figures and let him play in the house. You'll also be helping your child develop his pretend play skills.

### **2** For very young children, you can use blocks for container play.

Start with an empty diaper wipes container, the type that has a lid that pops open. Fill up the box with some blocks. Then your child can reach his hand in and pull the blocks out. Or if the box is empty your child can place the blocks inside the box. This would be an excellent play routine to model the prepositions "out and in." Container play is also useful for teaching your child object permanence (i.e., the idea that an object exists even when it's been placed out of sight), cause and effect like those fun toys with the pop-up doors, and problem-solving for those blocks that are tricky to take out or put in.

### **3** When your child is of an appropriate age, then you can use colored letter blocks to teach cognitive skills such as the alphabet or color names.

Most children begin recognizing some letters between the ages of 2 and 3 and can identify most letters between 4 and 5. Your child's ability to know different colors starts around 18 months, the same time she begins to notice similarities and differences in shape, size, and texture. But it will be a while longer before she can name the colors; most children can label at least one color by age 3. You can continue to use these blocks as your child's literacy skills grow.



**IDEA:** Use letter blocks to build words, to help your child sound out simple consonant-vowel-consonant words (i.e., cat, mom, cup), or to work on word families and even practice spelling as she gets to elementary school.

### **4** Lego or magnetic blocks are fun types of blocks to work on following directions with your older children.

You can either use the step-by-step photos that are typically included in the toy's manual, or draw a photo yourself. Let your child build the object in the photo by following the visual directions. Then, either have him give you instructions to make your own identical object or describe his process of building.

### **5** One of my favorite games to play with children working to improve their speech sounds in Jenga.

If you're struggling with your child to complete her speech therapy homework this will be a fun idea! Take your Jenga blocks and write, with permanent marker, different numbers on each block. Just put one number on each block. My set has primarily 2 through 5 written on each block with a few zingers like numbers 7 to 10, and a fun FREE block. Use your provided word list to practice the speech sounds in words, phrases, or sentences as you play. For example, if your child draws a block with the number "4" on it, then she practices 4 words or sentences.

## Ball

You really don't need to spend a lot of money to support speech and language development. You can use anything around you to stimulate and boost a child's speech and language skills. Sometimes the simplest toy, like a ball, is the most beloved.

In my years as a pediatric speech therapist, working both in homes and in clinics, I've spent many sessions playing ball with children. Balls are simple yet engaging, and they are enticing and fun for kids of all ages.

When you're buying a ball, I highly recommend that you consider something very soft (preferably made of foam). Kids like to throw balls, and the last thing I want to happen is for your great aunt's antique vase to get broken, or for you to wind up with a broken nose. Trust me; you will get hit in the head one day as you PWP. If it's the right time of year, you can likely find a beach ball at your local dollar store which is another fun option.



## 5 Tips for Playing With Purpose Using a Ball

### 1 Use a ball to teach turn-taking.

You can begin this with a child when he is young and just starting to sit up on his own. Get down on the floor and have your child sit in your lap. Then have another caregiver sit across from you. Help the child push/roll the ball to the person across from you. Continue back and forth as long as your child is enjoying the game. Again, this is setting up what is known as “serve and return” or reciprocal play. It is a foundational skill that children must learn that will later help him engage in conversational turn-taking.

### 2 Add a choice element to play.

Once your child has begun to roll the ball back and forth with you, ask her, “Should I roll the ball or bounce it?” You may offer a choice that involves the people in the room by asking, “Should I roll the ball to you or mom?” When you are outside, you can add in choices such as throwing, hitting or kicking the ball. The child then has an opportunity to choose how she wants to return or move the ball next. Making choices during a fun activity will help your child develop decision-making skills and will help build her sense of responsibility.

### 3 Use a ball to play a listening game to build a child’s receptive language (i.e. comprehension or understanding).

Spread out 2 – 3 pictures, toys or objects on the floor. Then ask the child to roll or throw the ball to a specific item you have named. When working with a young child on identify objects to build vocabulary say, “roll the ball to the cup.” If the child needs extra help, then you can provide a visual cue by pointing to the cup. For a child who is working on identifying sounds or speech sound production say, “throw the ball to the picture that begins with the /f/ sound.”

### 4 Integrate the ball into target sound practice.

Children develop vowel sounds first and later, the sounds we make with our lips. Those are the sounds the letters P, B, and M make. You can encourage production of these sounds by naming words with a certain sound as you play ball with your child. Work on the /b/ sound with words like “ball,” “bounce,” “bye-bye,” or “bump.” You can work on the /p/ sound using the words “pat” or “push” and the /m/ sound for “more,” “me,” “my ball,” and “my turn.” The words “kick” and “catch” are also good vocabulary for playing with a ball and help with another early developing sound, the /k/.

### 5 Balls can be used to facilitate a question and answer game.

Specifically, answering WH questions (i.e. who, what, when, where, why, and how) during listening or reading comprehension work. Each color segment on the ball can represent one question. You can write the questions directly on the ball with a permanent marker or have a chart to use as a key. After the child reads or listens to a passage or story, you throw her the ball. Whichever color her right thumb is on when she catches the ball, indicates which question she will answer.

# Farm Set

## Moo. Baa. Oink. Quack.

Imagine a well-loved farm set on the floor in front of your child.

If you do not already have a farm set in your home or therapy toolkit, then I highly recommend getting one. My number one tip when adding a farm to your toy repertoire is to find one that does not have added sounds. Many sets have buttons to push and hear the animal sounds. While that is lots of fun for your child, the toy is doing all the work. You do not want the barn to make the animal sounds; you want your child to make them.

I've already encouraged you in a previous section to "skip the batteries." If you or your family already have a farm set that makes sounds, simply remove the batteries. If you are buying a new toy or looking for one at a resale shop, then go back to the basics. A [Melissa & Doug](#) farm set is a great choice.

A farm set is what we call an open-ended toy. It has no beginning, middle, or end. Open-ended toys can be used in a variety of different ways. They allow your child creative freedom in how to use the toy and manipulate its components.

There is a wide array of ways to compliment playing with farm sets to increase language and vocabulary development and to give authentic exposure to new ideas and topics. For example, at home or in your clinic, you can use books about a farm or farm animals as an extension of your play with the farm set. If you live in a large city where your child may not have exposure to the animals, books can provide a glimpse of the real animals in photographs. Books and field trips provide opportunities to explore new vocabulary. These immersive experiences help the child generalize his knowledge from one context to another, while also expanding his perspective on categories, such as animal names and types.

## Top 5 Tips for Playing With Purpose Using a Farm Set

### 1 Use farm animals to develop early sounds.

Animal sounds and names contain some of the earliest sounds children can typically say. These include the vowel sounds and the sounds we make with our lips. Early sounds are produced with a simple syllable structure — either a consonant-vowel (CV) combination, like "baaaa," or in a CVCV pattern, such as "moo-moo." Try holding one of the farm animals up near your eyes and mouth. Say the sound the animal makes. Then, pause to give your child a chance to imitate the sound before handing him the toy. When you hold the toy up near your face, it directs the child's attention to the toy that he likely wants but also provides some of the visual support he needs to learn what his mouth should be doing.

### 2 Play and pretend.

Simple pretend play such as feeding her farm's cow will emerge at 18 – 24 months old. You and your child can pretend the animals are eating/drinking, riding in a tractor, sleeping in the barn, or running through the fields. You can also pretend to have your farmer take care of the animals by giving them food, brushing the animals, or helping animals if they get hurt. Encourage your child to imitate your pretend play actions if she does not use pretend play independently.

### 3 Identify the animals by their attributes.

Teaching qualities, descriptions, and categories builds vocabulary and highlights part-whole relationships. Ask the child you are working with to identify the farm animals when you describe them. You could describe the animal by the sound it makes, something the animal likes, or how people use the animal. For example, you might say “Show me the animal that says moo,” “Show me the animal that likes to play in the mud,” or “Show me the animal that people can ride.”

### 4 Incorporate prepositions into your play.

Prepositions (i.e. location words) are words such as “in,” “on,” “under,” “next to,” “out,” “off,” “up,” and “down.” Give the child a direction that matches her current skill level like, “Put the pig on top of the barn.” You may challenge her with a two-step direction such as, “Put the cow in the barn and the farmer next to the tractor.” You could also set up the farm set in advance and then ask WH-questions. For example ask, “Where is the horse?” or “What is the pig doing?” while working to develop an understanding of prepositions to encourage comprehension, listening skills, and following directions.

### 5 Narrate the scene.

Help your child learn to tell stories by making up a story about the farm animals or acting out a story from a favorite farm book. For instance, you could read the story “Henny Penny” or “The Little Red Hen” and then act out the story with your farm animals. You could also make up your own farm story. Start a story for your child where a pig runs away and gets lost, the tractor is broken, or a horse falls down a hill and hurts his leg. Then prompt your child to finish the story. You can ask questions like, “What would happen next?” or “Where would the animals go next?”



**IDEA:** Your child or the child you are working will love when you get down on the floor and play with her like a kid. Don't be afraid to get silly and start moo-ing like a cow. When you engage your child in purposeful play, you prolong an interaction and thus provide more chances for language learning!



## Candy Land (and Other Board Games)

I use board games all the time during my individual speech therapy sessions. They are a fantastic tool for speech, language, and social skill development in young children. [Candy Land](#) is a particular favorite of mine. I don't have a great memory, but I do remember the version of Candy Land we had at home when I was a kid. It looks a little different these days, but the lessons are still the same. You can use Candy Land in *Playing With Purpose* to help your child learn colors and simple counting skills as well as to help build turn-taking abilities. Did you know that helping kids learn how to take turns during a basic game begins to teach them the turn taking skills we use as adults in conversation?

Not only are games essential for helping kids learn social-cognitive skills like turn taking and joint attention, but they can also be used to reinforce during more structured tasks like homework or for teaching other speech-language skills such as speech sound practice.

Learning language does not have to be done in a structured environment. There are lots of simple games you can play to indirectly work on speech and language skills. These can be played while driving in the car to kindergarten (*I Spy*), when you are at the park (*Hide and Seek*), or in the supermarket (find all the things that are red). In game play, you have the opportunity to work on social skills, turn-taking, observing, listening, attention, and if you choose, speech and language too.



## Top 5 Tips for Playing With Purpose With Candy Land

### **1 Many games require counting skills and Candy Land is no different.**

You count the spaces you move, count the pieces you have left or the pieces you may need. When you play Candy Land you can target counting by having your child count many things: how many spaces until he reaches the castle, how many spaces is he ahead of mommy, or how many spaces does he get to move during his turn. Other math skills to target include adding points at the end of the game, sorting and matching pictures and game pieces, and sequencing skills.

### **2 Increasing social interaction is probably one of the most obvious skills we can help children learn when playing Candy Land or other games.**

I cannot think of a single board game you can play on your own, most for young children require 2 – 4 players. When your child is first learning to play games, it's important to have an adult as one of the players. Adults can model good social skills for children and help facilitate the play. As your child gets older, he can play Candy Land on his own with his friends. Once Candy Land begins and the kids start talking about the game, there are a variety of social cues they will learn. These social cues include maintaining eye contact with others, understanding facial expressions, nonverbal gestures, and patience/waiting.

### **3 Children learn a lot about language and vocabulary by hearing it.**

They can learn a variety of words specific to each game and are introduced to new words and their meanings when you, as a parent, model use. Candy Land is a great game for helping your child learn her colors, but it can also be great to teach descriptive concepts and social-emotion vocabulary. I like using Candy Land to help children understand possessive pronouns. You can teach them to use my/yours during the turns of the game.

### **4 Helping children learn to follow directions is another skill to address when playing Candy Land.**

In fact, each game we play with our children has its own set of rules and directions to follow. While playing different games, children are learning how, when, where and why you do certain things — which aid in critical thinking and problem-solving. They also will eventually learn the sequence of game play the more often they are exposed to it. In Candy Land, first, you pick up your card, next you count the number of squares to move and see your color, and finally you move your gingerbread man.

### **5 Candy Land is a great game to use as a reinforcer.**

I work with many children who need help producing their speech sounds correctly. It makes them more intelligible. One way we accomplish this is with repetition which can get a little boring. Playing games like Candy Land can relieve the monotony. Start by picking an interval, let's say five. The child practices five words and then he takes a turn. This idea can be incorporated into any structured task you want your child to complete or during any kind of skill practice



# 5

Activities for  
Playing with  
Purpose



## Activities for Playing with Purpose

Let's turn our focus now to games and activities that you can do with your child, again all with the purpose of developing your child's language skills. Some of these things can make your child laugh, and even squeal with delight. But, at the very same time, she will be taking step after small step on this wonderful journey of learning.

Once again, not every tip that I offer here will appeal to or be appropriate for every child. Choose those which are a good fit for your own child at her particular developmental stage.

First, let's think specifically about vocabulary. In Chapter 2 we spoke about the importance of vocabulary, and building up the number of words that your child knows and uses. But can you imagine anything duller than trying to get him to sit down and memorize lists of words by rote? With smaller children it would be an impossible task, and even when they get a little bit older it would still surely qualify as "cruel and unusual punishment."

That's not how to approach it. Far better to build the process of learning new words into her everyday activities and play.



## 5 Fun Activities to Build Vocabulary

### 1. Use your five senses during play.

Engage in sensory play with your child and describe what you see, hear, feel, taste, and smell. You could plan a sensory-specific activity like playing in the sandbox with hidden treasures. This will give your child many opportunities to hear and use descriptive words which are a great vocabulary builder. Descriptive words can include size, shape, color, texture, temperature, quantity, etc.

### 2. Encourage play with a variety of toys.

Your child probably has a favorite toy; maybe a firetruck. But different types of toys require children to use different types of language. Playing with a house toy encourages words like “mommy,” “table,” “potty,” and “sit,” while playing with trains may help a child to use words like engine, conductor, tracks, and go. Having a variety of toys available contributes to developing specialized language for each toy theme.

### 3. Play with children of different ages.

When your child plays with other kids who are different ages, he gets to try out different roles. When he is the older child, he gets to be the leader. When she is the younger child, she gets a chance to learn from others. Older children can provide an excellent model of new and different ways to use vocabulary too. Playing with peers is also beneficial for practicing social skills and social language and vocabulary.

### 4. Repetition is key.

Repetition is important for acquiring any new skill, and that’s particularly true with young children. Think of the adage, “Practice makes perfect.” When you introduce new words, use them in more than one instance to help it stick in your child’s memory. If you’re reading James and the Giant Peach, your new word may be “giant.” You could say, “Wow, that tow truck is giant,” as you point to it across the street. If your child does not pick up on the new word and use it right away, don’t worry. Like many things, children need to hear certain words or phrases more often than others before the language becomes a permanent word in their vocabulary.

### 5. Help your child expand her sentences.

You can keep a conversation going by expanding your child’s words and phrases. If she says, “dog,” then you can say, “Yes, that is a dog. It is a small, brown dog.” You can also encourage your child to expand on his sentence by asking a question such as, “What is the dog doing?”

## Playing With Water

I love playing with water for its simplicity, the ease of getting started, and the fact that it's very engaging for kids at many different ages.

There are many ways to have fun with play in the water — in the bathtub, using a wading pool, at a water table, or at the kitchen sink. As a traveling SLP, all I need is a tub I can fill up with water and my usual therapy toys. Playing with water is a multi-sensory activity that will also encourage your child to communicate, imagine, experiment, and socialize.

### Build Your Own Water Table

You do not have to go out and buy a water table for your child; you can quickly make one from things you already have in the house. First get a large plastic container or a bucket. I prefer a clear plastic bin so your kids can see the water from all angles. Then gather a bunch of household items. Find things that will sink, squirt, or float such as cups, spoons, a turkey baster, spray bottle, sponges, and a funnel. Also, consider grabbing some of the plastic toys you have such as action figures, animals, vehicles, pretend food, and toy dishes. Now you are ready for water play.



## Top 5 Tips for Playing With Purpose in Water

### 1 Play the game “Sink or Float.”

As you are making your DIY water table, be sure to have some items you know will sink and then some that float. This game is great for targeting predicting. Start by dividing a piece of paper in half and write “sink” on one side and “float” on the other. Then have the child guess or predict what will happen when you place each item in the water. Record your child’s predictions either with words or in pictures. Once all the predictions are made, test it out.

### 2 Work on basic concepts while playing with sponges.

You can teach concepts such as color, size, and shape during water play. Get some brightly colored sponges and cut them into different shapes. Have your child sort or match the sponges by color or shape. You can add and model language during this activity to highlight the basic concepts. Try using sentences such as, “I see you found a yellow sponge,” or “Look, that sponge is a triangle.”

### 3 Make speech sound practice interesting.

You can use play with water to target the sounds your child is working on in speech therapy. Gather items that begin with your child’s target speech sound and place them in the water. For example, if your child is working on the sound /k/ then you could get a cup, car, can, some pretend food (i.e., corn, cookie, candy). Say the words and encourage your child to repeat them after you. You can have your child use words in a simple sentence like, “I have a cup,” for practice at the phrase level.

### 4 Help your child make a request.

Playing in water is a fun time to work on simple requesting skills. Hold the desired toy just out of your child’s reach and then wait. Waiting will give your child an opportunity to initiate or make the request on his own. Be mindful of your child’s current level of communication; he may look at you and his desired toy which is an essential form of non-verbal communication. Reward any attempt at communication by giving your child the toy. If you’re waiting for him to use a word or an approximation of a word during this play routine, you can model the language needed and then pause to see if your child imitates you.

### 5 Practice turn-taking.

Turn-taking is a vital social skill for children to learn and integral for speech, language and social development. They use it early on during games and basic play; as adults, we use it in conversation. Limit the number of toys in your tub when working on turn-taking during water play. I would start with two cups and one other toy. The limited repertoire will encourage your child to stay in the interaction with you if you make it fun! Take turns pouring the water while trying to sink one of the cups. Model language such as “your turn” and “my turn.”



**IDEA:** Playing in the water will be enjoyable for your kids when you are present in the moment and get down at their level to play. While playing, work in some narration (i.e. “sportscasting”) to add language and vocabulary to the water play time. When you are having fun and participating, your child will be more engaged and likely to stay in this water interaction with you. The longer you interact with each other, the more opportunities you have to boost and stimulate her language.

# Yoga

One day I was on a walk with my dog through a nearby park which is also part of a school playground. It was the afternoon, and the kids were playing outside as part of their after-school program. I immediately noticed a small group of children and their teacher doing yoga poses. It did not appear to be an organized activity, but something that organically happened as a result of their interest in the young woman who clearly practiced yoga.

This reminded me that children like to emulate the things and activities adults engage in, and those activities can be moments of authentic learning and connection — Playing With Purpose.

Yoga is more than exercise, it's also a therapeutic tool, sometimes referred to as “yoga-peutics.” It's become a popular activity to do with children. After my walk in the park that day, I began to explore ways to combine yoga with my work as a pediatric speech-language pathologist.

There are many well-known motor and health benefits of yoga activities for kids, so I thought about how I could use it to enhance a child's speech and language skills. For starters, yoga and body-based activities can be used to teach pre-linguistic communication, breath support for speech production, vocabulary development, symbolic play, motor planning for speech, and emergent literacy.

While some of the resources I'm about to share carry a small cost, you can also do yoga speech therapy for free in your home. I recommend doing an image search for “children's yoga poses.” Use the images to create a collection of yoga pose cards to use with your child. Be sure to include the name of the pose as you make these cards so that you can align with my tips and post-specific activities.

## Top 5 Tips for Playing With Purpose During Yoga

### 1 Pair a book with yoga.

This is a great way to incorporate multi-sensory learning, which helps solidify teachings in a child's brain. In her book [Go Go Yoga For Kids: a Complete Guide to Yoga with Kids](#), author Sara Weis provides step-by-step lesson plans for incorporating yoga into reading family favorites. My favorite lesson is from a book I hold dear: [Brown Bear, Brown Bear](#). This lesson targets vocabulary (i.e., the names of the animals) as each animal in the book is paired with a yoga pose. With each animal in the book, pause and practice the pose with your child. During this practice, you will provide verbal repetitions of the animal names. You have endless opportunities to teach vocabulary and connect through a book, including: reading the book, demonstrating the pose, talking about what you are doing and narrating your child's actions, and praising the child for her hard work.

### 2 Match objects to yoga movements.

Many yoga poses, particularly those used with children, are named after real objects. Some of them include tree, cat, cow, dog, baby, boat, triangle, and pretzel. Find photographs of the object or the object itself and have the child label or name each one verbally. Next, say something such as, “Let's pretend to be a tree.” Demonstrate the pose and help the child get into it.



**IDEA:** Repeat the name of the pose or object as you do it, inviting your child to repeat the names with you. This will provide the child many opportunities to hear, say, and remember the name of that object.

### **3** Hold a yoga pose while practicing speech sounds.

Again, when kids are engaged in a motor activity while simultaneously practicing a new skill, more areas of the brain are activated. This leads to a higher chance of retaining the skills. Get yoga cards out and have your child choose a pose to try. After helping the child get into the pose, ask him to produce the target sound or words that include the target sound as many times as he can. The child will choose a new pose and practice another word, phrase, or sentence while holding the posture. Notice: Is your child producing more repetitions during this active speech sound practice than times you've sat at the table?

### **4** Address listening skills or following directions with a child.

Spend some time learning the poses or exposing the child to new postures before you advance to the following directions activity. Begin with one pose, especially if the child is struggling with one-step directions, and work your way up to a sequence of two to three poses. I suggest using pictures as a visual support when getting started. As the child's skills improve, you can hide the images, so she uses her auditory memory to help follow the directions.

### **5** Practice breath work.

Breath work is an integral component of yoga and breath support is incredibly important for speech. You can use yoga breath work to build breath support, which allows us to sustain speech for full sentences at a time, and bring attention to belly breathing. I like using "balloon breath" for kids ages 3 to 6. Cue the child to breathe in and out through her nose while her hands hold an imaginary balloon. She can pretend the balloon is getting larger every time she breathes out. For kids a bit older, ages 7–11, teach them about "rising and falling breath." Have the child lay on her back with her hands resting on her stomach and begin to pay attention to her breath. Instruct the child to let her breath rise up through her rib cage and out to her sides. Then slowly exhale and push the air out, filling up her belly. Breathing deeply and consciously also helps strengthen the nervous system, reduce anxiety, calm the body, and be present in the moment.



## Family Meal Time

I can imagine some people may be thinking, “I don’t want my children playing while we are engaged in family meal time.” At a young age, it is vital for our young ones to have time to play with their food, and we will get into that later, but that’s not exactly what I am referring to for the moment. Remember, the idea behind Playing With Purpose is that you bring some intentionality into the time you spend with your children. When you do you can develop and build their speech and language skills.

Family meal time is a great opportunity for building these skills as it’s a familiar, daily routine. Routines mean repetition. Repetition is critical for growing and learning new skills. You are a busy parent or caregiver. Work, your child’s activities, social engagements, civic involvement, and family responsibilities tug at your time every day. Despite this busyness, I encourage you to take time each day to eat as a family. You will reap quality time and lasting benefits. If dinner is a super busy time of day, then sit down for breakfast in the morning or lunch on the weekend. The meal does not have to be fancy. It could easily be carried out from a restaurant or a frozen pizza. What does matter is the regular and focused family meal time.

Get your children involved during family meal time with other routines you commonly engage in such as grocery shopping and cooking. Cooking together will expose kids to new vocabulary, provide an opportunity to address following directions skills, create moments of connection and bonding, allow you to get your hands dirty, and ideally be fun. There are many cookbooks on the market designed for use with your children. However, another activity I recommend is creating your own family cookbook that contains recipes each family member loves.



## Top 5 Tips for Playing With Purpose at Family Meal Time

### **1 Messy play is incredibly beneficial for babies.**

It offers many opportunities for learning in a variety of developing areas and is excellent during family meal time. Talk to your baby while he plays with the food; talk about how it feels, what color it is, what it tastes like, and use many descriptive words. This early exposure to new and different vocabulary will show up later as your baby begins to speak and expand his sentences.

### **2 Family meal time is another opportunity to teach your child social skills.**

Children can learn these skills from example and by the ways you model appropriate social interaction. From a young age, we can show children how to use words like “please” and “thank you.” They will learn turn-taking skills as they wait for a dish to be passed or served. You can model behaviors such as keeping elbows off the table and focusing your attention on the speaker with eye contact and body language.

### **3 You can have your child work on requesting objects by having him ask for all of the different foods served at dinner.**

It is an opportunity to again use the Hanen strategy of “offer a little bit, then wait.” Start by giving your child a small portion of each food. Then, when he wants more of something, have him ask you for more. The amount of language you expect your child to use is dependent on his current skills. Try to make your child use slightly more language than he is spontaneously using. For example, if your child uses one word to request “milk,” help him use a two-word phrase to request such as “want milk.” If your child has more language, you can have him ask using a full sentence with correct grammar.

### **4 While sitting at the table, you can teach the conversation skills of asking and answering questions appropriately.**

Try using these conversation starters or an open-ended question to help elicit a more extended response. An open-ended question allows a child to use more than a yes/no answer to communicate. For example, “What do you want to eat for lunch tomorrow?” gives your child a chance to think of her own ideas, practice vocabulary, share specific thoughts, and be creative.

### **5 Make dinner time into “good speech sound” time.**

I made this suggestion because we are working to help a family to encourage their child to use her speech sounds more proficiently in conversational speech. Start by setting a time limit. Then let your child know you are going to help her to remember to use her good sound. Having an activity to do like family meal time, will help pass the time and likely be less overwhelming. Every time you hear your child miss her sound, gently remind her of it. The beautiful thing about working on speech sounds this way is that your child knows you’re not going to bug her all the time since most meals are a fairly standard length.

## Outdoor Play

When you engage in outdoor play with your kids, you foster growth, development, and exposure to a multitude of new experiences. And it's a cost-free language tool! Simply head out to the park, walk down the street in your neighborhood, take a hike in the greenbelt, or step into your backyard. A host of opportunities is at your disposal.

If you are interested in sprucing up your outdoor play a bit, be mindful of the toys you choose. My general rules of thumb when selecting toys for kids include:

- Pick toys where your child does the work such as a set of buckets and shovels.
- Buy toys without batteries like a sandbox or a water table.
- Don't be afraid to get down and play like a child. Be creative. Get dirty. Have fun!

Melissa Bernstein, co-founder of the toy company Melissa & Doug, is on a mission to "Take Back Childhood." I fully support this mission. Outdoor play is a great place to start. Outdoor play provides time for imagination and wonder.

### Top 5 Tips for Playing With Purpose During Outdoor Play

#### **1** Encourage sensory play where you and your toddler describe what you see, feel, hear, taste and smell.

This is a great activity for vocabulary building. Try hiding items in your sandbox or sand bin; and helping your tot describe what he has found. You can also use this activity to talk about the sand. Explore how it feels, looks and even sounds as you move it around with your hands. Use sensory words during any play to provide your child exposure to new words. This will, in turn, give him many more descriptive words to use.

#### **2** A nature walk provides an environment to work on categories.

Get 2 paper bags, like grocery store bags with handles. They will be easy for you and your children to carry around as you explore your backyard, a nature trail, or the park. Then choose two different groups or ways to sort the items you find. Some suggestions are: hard vs. soft, green vs. brown, and heavy vs. light. Again, categories also help build vocabulary.

#### **3** The playground or playscape at your neighborhood park is a fantastic location to build an outdoor obstacle course.

Adding movement to your child's play also promotes multi-sensory learning. Choose three to five activities and tell your child the sequence. This will encourage skills such as following directions, sequencing, listening, and auditory memory. An example is, "Go down the slide, walk under the swing, and then jump 2 times next to the ladder." If your child has difficulty remembering the steps, then model the sequence for him and see if he can follow the routine.



**IDEA:** After your child has completed the obstacle course, have her retell/recall the steps to build her expressive language.

## **4** Plan a fun outing and record the day in a scrapbook.

You could visit the zoo or walk in the greenbelt. Take digital pictures of the outing and print them off. Then help your child build a construction-paper scrapbook (i.e., staple a few pages of paper together and glue in the pictures) to remember the day. Guide your child as she sequences the pictures in order (“What did we do first?”) and tell you about each picture. You can ask WH-questions such as, “Where did we go?” or “Who went to the zoo?” to help recall the details. Afterwards, encourage your child to share or “read” the book with family and friends!

## **5** While playing with water is not exclusively an outdoor play activity, I think parents prefer messy play outdoors.

You can also use abstract language that will stimulate your child’s thinking when playing with water. For example, you can use language to pretend, such as “Let’s pretend this bowl is a pirate ship, looking for treasure!” Together you can hypothesize and predict, thinking about which objects will sink or float before you place them in the water. Sink or float is a fun game I play with children who have trouble with their /s/ sound too.



## Grocery Shopping

You are a busy parent. Despite the growing number of delivery services, doing your own grocery shopping makes sense for you and your family. However, having to go to the grocery store with your children in tow can be challenging. I often hear parents tell me that grocery shopping with their children is a struggle. Either the kids are bored, tired, or want foods they cannot eat. It becomes a race to see how quickly you can grab everything you need and get out of the store.

It does not have to be this way. Why not make a trip to the grocery store easier for you and more fun for your children?

The grocery store provides unlimited amounts of new and different vocabulary to introduce to your children. You can help your child build vocabulary by naming items as you walk by them, using descriptive words to talk about how the food looks (size, color, shape) or allowing your children to touch food and use new vocabulary to describe how it feels (cold, bumpy, soft).

You can bring the grocery store home if your child has developed or is developing pretend play skills. Almost all of the activities I describe below will work well with a set of pretend play food or a mini grocery store set. You can also buy a play cash register to teach your child money concepts and basic math operations such as counting and addition. If your child is apprehensive about an environment like the grocery store which can be loud, have bright lights, and lots of movement, then read a book to prepare her for what she may encounter. I love the [Little Critter](#) one from Mercer Mayer.



## Top 5 Tips for Playing With Purpose in the Grocery Store

### **1 Turn your trip to the grocery store into a scavenger hunt.**

Now I am not suggesting you let your child roam the store by herself. You can do this while she is sitting in the shopping cart or walking next to you. Give your child a short list of things you need to buy and have her pick them out and cross them off the list as you go. You can add some listening and problem solving into the mix by giving her a direction. Try saying, “We need to buy fruit. Where do you think we would find it?”

### **2 Categories is a great skill to address in the grocery store.**

Encourage your child to find foods based on temperature, food group, color, and texture. You can work on auditory memory for categories by giving him a direction such as, “Find one item that is red, two items that are cold, and four items that are crunchy.” If your child is working with a pediatric speech therapist as has target speech sounds, have him find foods in the store that begin with his speech sound.

### **3 I Spy is another fun game to play while shopping at the grocery store.**

This one allows you to help your child improve her understanding of descriptive language and another way to address listening skills. Give your child two to three clues about your secret item and encourage her to guess what the item is. For example, you might say, “I spy something cold and sweet that we find in the freezer.” And for a special bonus: she gets to pick out a special treat and take it home for her good work.

### **4 You can work on social communication at the grocery store.**

Have your child practice greetings and asking questions to unfamiliar adults. When you get to the cashier, encourage your child to greet the person serving you. You can also model good social communication by demonstrating this: give good eye contact, say “hello,” and ask the cashier how her day has been. If your child is a bit older, you can let her help with the transaction by asking the cashier questions. For instance, your child could ask, “How much do our groceries cost?” and then help you make the payment.

*I saved the best for last...*

### **5 Use your trip to the grocery store as an opportunity to introduce your child to cooking and nutrition by planning a snack together.**

There are fantastic [cookbooks for children](#) as well as tools to use in your kitchen. Pick out a recipe, have your child help you make the shopping list (he can practice his writing skills too), shop for the food items at the store, and go home to cook together. Following along with the recipe in the book will address following directions or receptive language. You can work on sequencing and recall by having your child describe to another family member the steps needed to make his treat.

## Bubble Blowing

Bubble blowing is a fun indoor or outdoor activity, and children of all ages love blowing bubbles. Children love to blow bubbles, watch the bubbles float up and down, pop bubbles and step on the bubbles over and over again. By blowing bubbles, you can quickly gain and hold a child's attention or calm or engage a fussy child.

Bubbles are also an excellent tool to promote speech and language development. You can work on early words and concepts, practice eye contact and turn taking, work on speech sounds and lip rounding — all while having fun.

The Hanen Centre refers to bubbles as a “people toy.” This means that they require adult help and thereby provide lots of opportunities for you and your child to interact. Since bubbles are engaging, they give your child a reason or purpose to communicate.

[Fubbles](#), no spill bubble containers, are a favorite for on-the-go families. It lets your child play with no spilling or clean up.

And if you haven't seen [Touchable Bubbles](#) yet, then prepare to be amazed. These bubbles are long-lasting and stackable. The bubble solution is a bit thicker, and the bubbles can last for hours without popping. I often challenge kids to see how many bubbles they can stack on the tip of their fingers.



## Top 5 Tips for Playing With Purpose when Bubble Blowing

### **1 Bubbles are a fun activity to promote eye contact and joint attention in young children.**

Start by engaging your child in a fun bubble blowing game. Blow the bubbles once and then pause or wait. Watch for your child's anticipation of more bubbles. Sit face to face with your child so that she can look at you and wait for eye contact before you blow more bubbles. The eye contact is her communication. It's no different than a child using the word "bubbles" in this instance. Praise your child by saying something such as, "I like how you told me you wanted more bubbles."

### **2 Did you know that bubble blowing is useful as an abdominal workout?!**

Use bubble blowing to strengthen abdominal muscles and breath support for sustained speech. Strong abdominal muscles can help increase sentence length. Encourage your child to blow consistently longer streams of bubbles each time you practice. To kick it up another notch, have your child sit on a balance ball while he is blowing. This will strengthen the abdominal muscles too.

### **3 Bubble blowing is a good activity to target other oral motor or mouth skills.**

Blowing exercises increase strength in the tongue for producing the sounds at the back of our mouth like consonants K and G. It's also good for working on lip rounding which is necessary for the consonant sound W and the vowels 'oo' and 'oh.' If you see that your child is using more of a flat lip posture, use your hands to gently push near her lips to encourage the lips to push forward into a circle. If this doesn't work, try having her wrap her lips around a wide straw (McDonald's straws work great) that has been cut to about 2" in length, then with her lips around the straw have her blow the bubbles through the wand. The straw positions her lips into the correct posture for blowing.

### **4 You can teach a variety of action words or verbs and descriptor words while blowing bubbles.**

Vocabulary can include the following: want, pop, blow, again, dip, all done, up, down, in, out, on, off, round and round (when turning the lid), wet, sticky, big, and small. You can also practice using the word "go" in a fun phrase completion activity by saying "Ready, set, go" with excitement. Then repeat it and pause after the word "set" and wait to see if your child will fill in "go" before you start blowing the bubbles again. Remember to keep your language level at your child's level.

### **5 Bubbles are an excellent tool for practice and teaching turn taking.**

Basic turn taking routines teach kids the skills for conversational turn taking. Include modeling or teaching of 'your turn' and 'my turn' while handing the bubble bottle back and forth. Turn taking does not have to be limited to just the blowing, take turns popping the bubbles too.

## Reading Books

In general, exposure to books provides countless benefits such as:

- learning new vocabulary
- organizing thoughts and ideas
- learning new sentence structures
- building narrative language skills
- developing inferencing and problem solving skills
- fostering imagination
- social emotional development
- promoting attention to tasks
- strengthening listening comprehension

Felt books are fun for children because it allows them to be creative and develop their own stories. You can encourage them to be the “reader,” by using the pictures to tell the story in their own words.

Felt books or books with moveable parts are fantastic tools to help children increase their abilities to follow directions. The [Melissa and Doug Play Sets](#) are some of my favorites. You can start simple with a direction like “Put the cow next to the barn.” As your child’s abilities grow, the directions can become more complex to include multiple steps and concepts.



## Top 5 Tips for Playing With Purpose Using Books

### 1 Use books to introduce new vocabulary.

Talk about the new words you encounter while reading and give your child examples. Perhaps you are reading *Where the Wild Things Are* and you mention the word giant. You might tell your child “Giant means big. A dinosaur is giant! Can you think of some giant things?” Try to use their new vocabulary words throughout the following week.

### 2 Ask your child questions about what’s happening in the story.

By asking your child questions while reading, you can monitor his comprehension (a.k.a. understanding or receptive language), while also practicing various WH-questions. For example: “Who has an umbrella?,” “What is mama bear doing?,” or “Where is the dog?”

### 3 When you are reading books with older children make predictions.

This is an excellent way to build inferencing, problem solving and imagination. Brainstorm with your child what might happen in the story, or how a character might solve a particular problem.

### 4 Get creative with books by making your own book.

Print out pictures from a family outing or event. Help your child sequence the pictures in the correct order, and glue them in a construction paper book. Help your child create sentences to go with each picture, and then share book with family and friends. The child can even “read” the book himself.

### 5 When reading with young children who may not have many words yet let your child fill in words.

As your child becomes familiar with a particular book, leave out key words and let your child fill them in. This works especially well in repetitive books such as [Brown Bear Brown Bear](#). You might say “Brown bear brown bear, what do you \_\_\_\_\_?”

Let your child set the pace, and look for signs that indicate whether or not she is enjoying reading. Reading should be a positive experience, so avoid forcing your child to read beyond her attention span. Don’t worry if your child only wants to read part of a book before moving on. Instead, give her lots of positive praise for moments when she shares or listens. Let her know how much you enjoyed your time reading with her.

## Bath Time

One of the most effective ways to build language is during routines, especially routines that occur every day. That's why bath time is a great opportunity for you to connect with your child to build language. Bath time is a beloved activity for many children. It's easy to incorporate Playing With Purpose and sneak in many language building interactions without your child ever realizing he is ever doing "work."

This one-on-one time with your child is a great place to highlight everyday language skills. Some of my favorite vocabulary words to use during bath time are:

- water
- wash
- soap/shampoo
- toy names
- towel
- pour
- wet/dry
- body part names
- bubbles
- bath(tub)
- in/out

Bath time is great because you do not necessarily have to go out and buy anything new or specific. And as a bonus, bath time is something that is already part of your day so no need to build in extra time to sit on the floor and play.



**IDEA:** If your child is not a water baby, then books about bath time provide opportunities to introduce new words and concepts in a less stressful environment. You can use the books as a tool to talk about how much fun the characters are having during his bath time to help ease your little one's fears.

### Top 5 Tips for Playing With Purpose During Bath Time

#### **1** Bath time is an opportunity to incorporate descriptive language when you play a game of "Sink or Float."

Gather up a bunch of items from around the house that you do not mind getting wet. Then try them out in the tub to see if they sink or float. Once you have done this with a few items your child can guess what is going to happen. This is another chance for him to practice making a prediction. Not only can you describe the color of the toys, but you can use "Sink or Float" to talk about what shape the toy is, what material it is made of, and most importantly is it heavy or light.

#### **2** Joint attention is an incredibly important skill our children must develop.

It's the sharing of an experience between a child and her communication partner — in the case of bath time that is you, her parent. There are lots of things you can do during bath time to get your child's attention. Try blowing bubbles, splashing water, or getting some multi-sensory bath toys. Also, try taking turns with your child. Wait for her to look at you which is an indication she wants an activity to be repeated.

#### **3** The beauty of bath time is that it is a routine.

Most likely you repeat the same sequence of events each time your child takes a bath. Talk about the steps he takes during bath time. This is referred to as using self-talk or parallel talk and is a great tool to model good vocabulary. Use vocabulary such as: first, next, and last to highlight sequential terms. When your child becomes familiar with the routine, have him dictate the steps to you as he is taking his bath. If sequencing is challenging, then there are lots of fun puzzles you can use to help your child learn the skills.

## **4** There are tons of vocabulary words that are associated with bath time so it's a perfect activity to use to expand your child's use of word combinations.

If you hear your child say "wash," then respond with an expanded phrase. You might say, "Yes, daddy is going to wash your hand." Be sure to always include the word your child used, helping him to make the sentence more complete. Another example would be if your child said "on" while you're getting the bathtub ready. You could respond by saying, "Okay let's turn the water on."

## **5** Bath time provides a wonderful time for you to engage with your child and encourage imaginative play.

Try giving your child just a simple plastic cup and seeing all the fun games you can create together. Maybe your child turns the cup into a boat or a submarine. Then ask your child questions about the world he/she is creating. Let your inner child come out and play along with her.

Bath time is just one of many daily routines you and your child engage in throughout your days. Snack and meal time, getting dressed, brushing teeth, preparing to go to bed, and getting ready for school are all routines you can incorporate language learning opportunities into. Take a few minutes to think about how you and your child are Playing With Purpose throughout your day. It might surprise you or you may discover a new moment to spark some language.



## And So We Begin ...

It's the end of this book, but it's only the start of an amazing journey for you and your little one.

I have written every word of *Playing With Purpose* with the goal that you would arrive at this page encouraged and filled with new hope. Whatever concerns you have had for your child's development, and no matter how worrying it has been, I want you to realize that YOU are the greatest key to your child's success. I have worked to put real tools in your hand so you can get started right away. Start today! It's never a moment too soon.

### *But I also wanted to give you something else ...*

I wanted to make sure that you would not close this book without knowing that you don't have to do this all by yourself. Look at the title at the top of this page. I chose the words carefully. "*And so, WE begin ...*"

There are lots of people waiting to cheer you on. Family members and friends, teachers and caregivers, doctors and speech-language pathologists. Build a team around yourself and your child.

If you live in the Austin area, I'd be so happy to hear from you and to become part of your team. You will find all the contact details for my practice, Tandem Speech Therapy, at both the beginning and end of this book. Reach out to me for your FREE Communication Consultation call today. This service is available to families in Austin or elsewhere, as my [Playing With Purpose Coaching services](#) are accessible in person or online.

If you need additional support, send me an email and I'll do my best to offer my guidance or put you in touch with someone in your area.

Finally, I invite you to stay connected for continued resources and tools for your parenting journey. Join my e-mail list [HERE](#) and receive monthly updates and freebies.

All the very best as you "*Play With Purpose*,"

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Emily" followed by a small heart symbol.



## Meet the Author

Emily Cohen, M.A., CCC-SLP is the founder of the Tandem Speech Therapy, a pediatric speech therapy practice in Austin, TX. She specializes in working with young children and their families by teaching caregivers strategies for language stimulation through play and everyday routines.

As Helen Hayes famously said, *“The expert at anything was once a beginner.”* Before Tandem Speech Therapy’s Emily Cohen opened her own practice in 2017, she worked for more than ten years in pediatric clinics in Michigan and Austin. It was Emily’s cousin (an occupational therapist by trade) who first inspired her to become a speech-language pathologist.

While an undergraduate at Indiana University —Bloomington, Emily studied special education. Upon graduating, she worked in the public schools for a few years before returning for a Master’s Degree in Speech-Language Pathology. Although Emily enjoyed teaching, her favorite part of her job was forming meaningful relationships with kids and their families. She knew she could help even more families as a speech-language pathologist. Her previous work with kids with special needs continues to inform her pediatric speech therapy practice.

When she’s not working, Emily loves to travel, cook and eat, and stroll through Zilker Park with her husband and their dog.

### Follow Emily’s work:



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