

10 Actionable Steps for Parents of Late Talkers

1. **Talk to your child's pediatrician.** Learning to talk late is sometimes one of the first signs of another issue, such as hearing loss or language disorder. Communication is a key part of your child's development, so bring up any concerns or questions at your child's next visit.
2. **Start tracking your child's vocabulary.** You can use the [First Words Tracker](#) or keep a list on your phone—whatever works best for you. Note the date as you add new words to your list.
3. **Teach your child to “Serve & Return.”** In any great conversation, there is a back-and-forth exchange between people, similar to the back-and-forth between players in a tennis match. Sometimes late talkers expect only a one-way stream of talking coming from their adult to them, and they don't know how to participate. “Serve & return” is a way of interacting with children to help them learn the reciprocal nature of communication. Learn more about this in the article ["What Do Communication and Tennis Have in Common?"](#)
4. **Teach imitation.** Encourage your child to imitate you. Gestures like clapping, actions like patting a baby doll, silly facial expressions, and sounds like “moooo” are all important stepping stones to a child being able to imitate words. One way to get your child to imitate is for *you* to imitate *them*. If you make it feel fun, copying their sounds and actions, it will feel like a game and soon your child will try to imitate you.
5. **Help your child use their voice.** Some late talkers are pretty quiet. They don't babble a lot, don't make a lot of sounds while they're playing, and don't use a variety of sounds when they're trying to communicate with you. “Vocal play” is a good thing and will help your toddler feel confident to try talking. Like anything else, *showing* your child is more helpful than *telling* them to do something. So, during play or bathtime, use different sounds that go along with what's happening. For inspiration, check out this [list of play sounds](#).
6. **Consider teaching 3-4 signs.** Baby sign does not cause a delay in spoken language. If a toddler is having meltdowns over not being able to communicate his wants, think of a few powerful words to teach the signs for. Powerful words are words like “milk/juice/water” “slide/outside/park” and “help.” “More” and “please” lose their power as your child becomes mobile and begins wanting things that are not always in the here and now. Asking “more” or “please” doesn't help you understand when they want something in the other room or something that you did yesterday.
7. **Stop saying “Say.”** *Saying* a word is not the same as *using* a word. We can repeat a word after someone, but if we don't know what it means or how to use it,

it won't help us communicate with another person. To use a word, you have to understand what the word means, you need to have heard how it's used in sentences, and you have to have a reason to use it. Instead, focus on modeling how to use words. Use a word several times in short, grammatical sentences. Emphasize the word with your voice, and show what the word means when possible. For example, if your child notices an airplane in the sky, you can say "Airplane! Do you see that *airplane*? The *airplane* is flying in the sky!" all while pointing up to the airplane as you say the word.

8. **Slow down.** When you talk rapidly, it makes it harder for a toddler to learn the meanings of individual words and how to use them in conversation. Fast-talking also takes away from the number of opportunities your child gets to try talking. Slow down your speech if you're a fast-talker, adding natural pauses as you go.
9. **Cut down on the number of questions you ask. Make comments instead.** Instead of saying... "Is that a trash truck? What color is it? Is it loud? What sound does it make?"
Try saying... "Whoa! Look at the trash truck! That's a *big* trash truck. It's loud! Kshhhhh...vroom vroom!"
10. **Be interesting and interested.**

What kind of conversations do you like best? If you're like a lot of people, you might say you like conversations about things that interest you. You might also say you like talking with people who seem genuinely interested in what you're saying.

Babies and toddlers are no different. When you talk to them about something interesting they have just discovered, it will be much easier to keep their attention than if you start talking about something else instead. Likewise, when they make a sound or babble to "tell" you something, act very interested and respond with a short comment, then wait for their next "remark." This lets your child know that their words are powerful, their words serve a purpose, and that you want to hear more.

These steps are simple, but *extremely important*. This is especially true if your toddler is not talking as much as expected for their age. If you have any additional questions or need help implementing these things with your child, you are welcome to make an appointment at TVP for additional guidance and support.