



CdLS Foundation

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Reaching Out, Providing Help, Giving Hope

Experts Speak Out on Facilitating Communication

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As primary caregivers to their children, parents often worry about what can best be done to meet their child's many needs -- physical, emotional, social, nutritional and educational. What parents may not realize, is that they do a lot of language training without realizing it. For example, the parents of a 6-month-old child would almost intuitively know to slow their speech and cue with one word, "Ball. Where's the ball?" Six to twelve months later the child may have a word and the parent would know to use slightly longer utterances, "Go, bye-bye." However, when you have a child who is 3 or 4 years old, it may not be as easy to realize to stay with that one word utterance if the child's language age is really in the six-month range. Learning can be very gradual, it does not happen overnight, but it will evolve. As long as the child is using a word that you understand—that is still language. It is still symbolic.

There is a great discrepancy in the vocabulary ability of children with CdLS, yet it appears that even those with higher verbal aptitudes remain fairly quiet. Although most children with CdLS appear to be better at understanding what is being communicated to them (receptive skills) than what they are trying to communicate (expressive skills), they do have many ways of expressing their wants and needs. And, parents are often the best interpreters of their child's communication repertoire. This repertoire includes verbal expression, behavior cues and subtle gestures, which all function as a child's attempt to obtain attention or convey a message or feeling.

The importance of having your child assessed by six months of age cannot be underscored enough. A good assessment will let the parent know what they are doing correctly, what activities should be encouraged and how their child is doing developmentally. An assessment may also reveal if a hearing aid or FM system is necessary. Hearing is critical, particularly in the early years, and even the slightest hearing loss can be detrimental to the learning process.

It is not uncommon for a child with CdLS to be diagnosed as deaf or severely impaired at birth, only to have their hearing upgraded to moderate at one year of age and then to mild or no hearing impairment by their second birthday. This is a strong signal that it may be difficult to assess infants with the syndrome. Although the exact cause of these misdiagnoses is unknown at this time, it may be related to their small ear canals. What is known, is that many of these children are missing out on a year or two of receptive vocabulary.



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Some moms and dads have expressed concern about incorporating sign language or gestures with oral communication. However, there is good support in the research literature and from people's experiences that indicate both signing and gesturing will facilitate verbal skills. Children first learn through gestures, therefore it is okay to combine the sign with the oral. A common and very good way of doing this is to visually cue the child by holding an item to the mouth or gesturing in the air or on the child's arm while stating what that item is. For example, if you have a ball, you hold the ball near the mouth while saying, "Ball." Very rarely will this interfere with oral communication.

Developing verbal scripts is one way parents can encourage language development. Verbal scripts are single words, sentences or phrases that are repeated over and over again in the context of a particular activity. They increase the likelihood of making that word in the context of that activity. For example if a child was on a playground swing, you might incorporate "1-2-3 Push" into the script hoping the child would both imitate the words and associate them with riding a swing-set. Saying too many words can be confusing to the child and, therefore, decreases the likelihood of imitating particular words.

Communication is not a static element. It involves elements far more complex than just a simple message that is trying to be conveyed. Speech and hearing impairments can only add to this complexity. However, most parents are adept at tuning-in to the ways their child communicates both verbally and non-verbally. When this is coupled with the interventions of a speech and language specialist, the likelihood for enhancing the communicative process is great.