

Talk to Me:

Suggestions for Getting Children to “Open Up”

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Sometimes you may find it difficult to get a child to talk to you, especially one with a language disorder. He/she may already be aware that something's not right, or just be shy. Either way, it is challenging when you need to assess a child's speech and language skills, and he/she won't speak. This is not beneficial to the child, the therapist, or the parent. Use the following suggestions to help a child open up.

Caregivers: Gaining a child's trust is difficult, especially if he/she is already scared and in an unfamiliar environment. We teach at an early age not to talk to strangers, so allowing the child's caregiver to be present during testing is the first way to get a child to talk to you. Ask the caregiver to remain impartial, unless the child refuses to speak. Then, have the caregiver prompt the child. Make sure that the caregiver does not give clues to the answer because this invalidates the results. For example, if the targeted elicitation from a swatch of color is “red” and the caregiver says, “You know, like I tell you. A fire engine is...,” the child has been given extra cues to elicit the correct response. On the other hand, if the caregiver says, “It's OK. Tell her the answer,” the results remain valid.

Puppets: It will amaze you how much a child will talk to a puppet, but will not talk to you. Keep a supply on hand of various shapes and styles. Some good ones to look for are puppets that represent community members such as firefighters, police officers, teachers, and doctors. Some other puppets that most children like are boys and girls. Animal puppets also go over well with a lot of children, however, try to keep these at a minimum.

Sometimes it works best when you give the children their own puppet and allow them to answer questions with the puppet. Again, use animal puppets minimally, or you may have some children pick a dog puppet and only answer your questions with “barks.” Be careful not to let the child get too silly using puppets or the answers you get from the child may not be valid, wasting diagnostic time.



Masks: Shy children, who don't scare easily, sometimes respond well to masks. You can make masks with tongue depressors, construction paper, and glue. Assign roles to yourself and the child. For example, you could be a pig from the *Three Little Pigs*, and the child could be Goldilocks from *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*. Ease the

tension a little by asking the child questions about his/her character. For example, you could say, "What was it like walking in the woods to Grandma's house?" Let the child respond, ask you questions about your character, and continue with the assessment maintaining the roles.

During the role-playing, gather valuable informal assessment information about sequencing, imagination, sentence construction, questioning skills, memory, vocal quality, fluency, and articulation. If possible, always record the session so you don't have to interrupt the flow by stopping to take notes.

Animals:

Most children like animals or are at least curious about them. You do not need a thirty pound Labrador, either, to grab their attention. A lot of children like small animals such as hamsters, gerbils, kittens/cats, or rabbits. Allow them, if not allergic, to pet and hold the animals, asking questions if they have any. If an animal with fur is not available or unreasonable for you, try a goldfish in a small bowl or even a bug, such as a firefly.

After the child looks at and asks questions about the animal, attempt to initiate the assessment. Tell the child that the animal (give it a name) really wants to hear your hear your answers and watch you point to pictures. Let the child hold it, if this eases tension.

Other children:

Sometimes kids respond best when other children are present. This gets difficult, however, if one child is shy and the other outgoing. If possible, set the scene up for the child you are not testing and make him/her feel like an important part of the "game." Tell him that you need help getting "Johnny" to talk. Set up a game where they can take turns with "Johnny" answering questions from the diagnostic and the other child answering alternate questions. If the child is still too shy, leave the room for a moment, and you'll probably be amazed at the language sample you can obtain through observation.

As speech-language pathologists and teachers, it is important for us to obtain the most valid results from assessments to make the best decisions for the child. With shy or frightened children, this becomes challenging. With a little creativity and a lot of fun, the results may amaze you!