



**Down's Syndrome
Association**

A Registered Charity No. 1061474

Communications Series



B. Pre Language Skills

For babies and young children

A Down's Syndrome Association publication

Our Information Team are here to help

Please see our website for up-to-date information: www.downs-syndrome.org.uk

If you would like to talk about the activities or where to start, then please get in touch with our helpline by calling 0333 1212 300 or by emailing us on info@downs-syndrome.org.uk.

Helpline Monday - Friday 10am-4pm | Telephone: 0333 1212 300

Pre-language skills

Before children develop speech, they need to develop pre-language skills (or non-verbal communication):

- **Eye contact** looking at you when you are talking
- **Listening** paying attention to words and sounds
- **Joint attention** sharing another person's focus of interest
- **Turn-taking** waiting and taking turns with another person
- **Pointing** pointing with hands and/or looking with eyes
- **Social gestures** for example, waving good-bye, nodding "yes" or shaking "no"
- **Babbling** making sounds
- **Symbolic noises** for example, animal and car noises

The following activities are to encourage pre-language skills. Remember to copy all noises your baby makes. Mimic your baby's babbling and your baby's facial expressions. As your child grows you can use the activities in this section to help develop her pre-language skills further.

Keep it fun for both of you!

In these activities, talk about what your child is interested in. Name objects and use a sign. Repeating the same words and signs lots of times will help your child to learn. Remember to speak slowly and clearly so that your child can process the information.

1. Eye Contact

Encourage your child to make eye-contact by placing him on your lap, facing you. You can do this during routines such as bath time, changing, dressing and feeding. Give your child 'social' rewards such as lots of praise and smiles when he looks at you.

Use a favourite toy to capture your child's interest. Hold it in front of your child's eyes, then slowly bring it towards your face, so your child is looking at you, then give her the toy as a reward.

2. Listening Skills

Play these games in a quiet place, with minimum distractions.

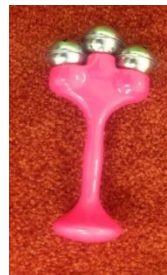
If your child does not yet walk, play listening games while sitting down. Sit opposite your child, at eye level. Make sure he can see your face.

If your child can walk, you can play listening games while moving around.

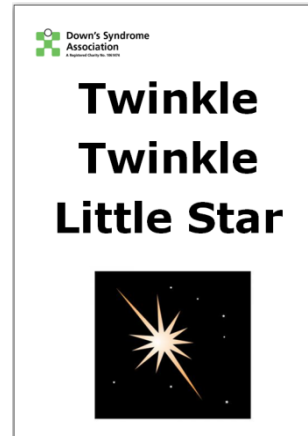
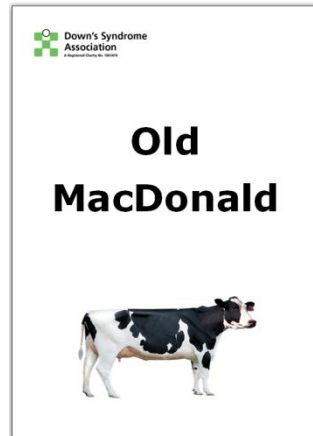
I. Listening Games: Sitting Down

a. Collect some noisy toys, such as rattles, bells and shakers. Show your child each toy and let her listen to the noise it makes.

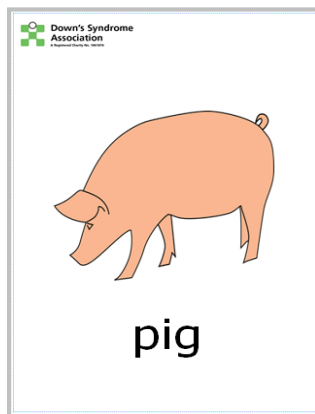
b. Hold up two toys and make a noise with one of them. See if your child will look, reach or point at the toy making the noise.



c. Sing [nursery rhymes and other songs](#). Use accompanying signs or gestures. Encourage your child to pay attention, listen and look at you. Showing a picture for a song may help your child to pay attention. Move the picture close to your face so your child watches your face and lips as he listens to you.



d. [Show one picture of a familiar noise making object and make the sound.](#) For example, you can use a picture of a dog (woof), a phone (ring ring), a balloon (blowing sound), a duck (quack). Hide the picture behind your back. Make the sound again and repeat several times. Then show the picture to your child.



e. Show your child pictures or models of animals. Make an animal noise for each animal. For example, 'moo', 'baa', 'quack quack', 'oink', 'meow', 'woof'.

f. Try a racing game, holding and releasing toys (eg. cars) that move forward. Say, "Ready...Steady...Go!" Wait for your child to respond before you let the toy go. Next, encourage your child to wait until she hears 'Go' before she releases the toy.

g. Listen for sounds at home and when you are out. See who can be first to hear 'car', 'bus', 'dog', 'bird', 'someone talking'. Children with Down's syndrome may find it hard to explore their environment by moving around and this is an important way to learn language. You can help your child by showing him the source of a noise.

h. Encourage your child to stay interested in a toy for as long as possible. For example, you can build a tower with bricks then knock down the tower, then bang the bricks together, then hide a brick in your hand to see if she can find it. This helps to develop your child's attention, listening and play skills.

II. Listening Games: Moving Around

- a. Move to music. For example, stop / go when the music stops / starts.
- b. Musical chairs. You can use cushions, hoops or beanbags.

3. Joint attention

Joint attention is when two people share interest in an object or event and both people are aware that they are interested in the same object or event.

Developing joint attention is an essential building block for learning to communicate.

Joint attention skills develop from sharing attention during natural, enjoyable activities. Many of the activities in this booklet, Pre-language skills, and in Keys to Communication in Early Childhood can support joint attention.

Responding to your child's interests and having fun together will help your child develop and learn!

You can help your child to develop joint attention skills by following her interests, imitating what she does and responding to her little behaviours immediately, including play and babble.

Follow your child's focus of attention. Shift your attention as your child shifts his attention from one thing to the next.

Look at things that interest your child together with him. Your baby's first interests are likely to be taste, texture, shape and sound.

Later your child may become interested in what objects do, for example, does an object light up or make a sound.

As she grows, your child may become more interested in the wider world around her. For example, environmental noises such as cars, animals, the washing machine.

Remember to be animated and use lots of gestures when playing to capture and maintain your child's attention. You can make your voice more animated by exaggerating and changing intonation. Watch your child carefully, follow his lead and give him time to share his interest and respond to you.

At first you can share attention when you are in close proximity to your child. For example, looking at a picture, book, a toy or by copying your child's movements. Later on, you will be able to share attention while you roll a ball backwards and forwards to each other.

4. Turn-taking

Play games with your hands such as 'Pat-a-cake', 'Round and round the garden' and 'Incy, wincy spider'). These are fun ways of making eye contact with your child and encouraging her to listen, pay attention and respond. When you play turn taking games talk in short, clear sentences. Emphasise key words and use signs. For example:

“Mummy’s turn”

“Kick the ball”

“Catch the ball!”

Here are some ways to play turn taking:

- Take turns to roll cars or balls along the floor.
- Take turns to post a shape into a shape sorter or drop a brick in a box.
- Take turns to roll a ball to knock down skittles.
- Take turns to beat on a drum (or a wooden spoon on a saucepan).
- Take turns to press a button to make a cause and effect toy react, e.g. make a 'Jack in the Box' toy pop up.
- Take turns to lift the flap in a 'Lift the Flap' book.
- Take turns to add another cup or brick to a tower.
- Take turns to roll a toy down a used kitchen roll tube or a ball run.

Later turn-taking games include:

- Inset puzzles - take turns to put each piece in.
- Take turns to put a brick on a tower or a train.
- Take turns tidying up - dishes or toys or clothes.

5. Pointing

Sit at your child's eye level so she can see what you are pointing at

Show your child an object he likes and wants, for example bubbles or a favourite toy or food

Encourage your child to reach for it. If your child finds reaching hard she can use eye gaze/looking and/or vocalisations..

As your child reaches forward, shape his hand into position with his first finger pointing to and touching the desired object. Say 'Point' and then name the object and use the sign at the same time.

Give the object as a reward. Allow your child time to explore the object, help her to hold it and turn it to look from different angles.

Repeat this activity as much as possible. Use different objects until your child can 'ask' for the object by pointing to it himself. Encourage your child to look at the object as he points.

When your child is beginning to point to her favourite objects you can give her a choice of objects. Start by introducing a favourite object and an object you know she will not want. When she is pointing clearly, you can introduce two objects that she likes. In time you can try adding more objects for your child to choose from.

To make it harder, encourage your child to look at your face, then to request by pointing and looking at what he wants, then to look back at your face. You can draw his attention to your face by saying, "Sam, look" while you point to your face.

The nursery rhyme 'Wind the Bobbin Up' is helpful as it encourages pointing.

Point to pictures in books and to things around you.

Make a personal book for your child. Use just one or two pictures per page. Point to the pictures and name them. Use photos of family members, friends, your child's bed, chair, bath, favourite toys, your hose and car etc.

Use 'first words' picture books. Point, say and sign the words.

6. Social Gestures

Encourage your child to wave 'good-bye' and 'hello'.

Encourage your child to nod 'yes' and shake 'no'.

Use other natural gestures, or signs, and encourage your child to use them too. For example: drink, eat, sleep, car, etc.

Show your child how to clap hands. He may need help at first. Then try clapping hands when singing songs and when he has succeeded at something.

7. Babble

Babbling is an important part of learning to talk. It is important to copy your child's babble and the sounds she makes. This helps her to know that you are engaged and understanding her. It also helps her to learn about different speech sounds.

If your child is quiet and does not babble very much you can still make babbling noises for him. Do this when your child can see your face clearly, for example when you are changing him, playing in the bath or sitting at the table with your child at eye level in a high chair.

Copy all the sounds your child makes, 'ba ba ba', 'da da da', 'aaa' or even blowing raspberries! Do this throughout the day, whenever your child is motivated to make a noise.

Let your baby touch your face. Help her to feel your lips, how much air is coming out of your mouth and if your voice box is buzzy or not.

Use a mirror. Sit with your baby on your knee facing away from you so you can look at your faces side by side. Encourage your child to watch the shapes your mouth and face make when you babble.

8. Symbolic Noises

Children often use symbolic noises before they start labelling objects. It is helpful to encourage these noises.

Animal noises: make animal noises for toy animals, pictures of animals and when you see real animals. For example, '**Look, there's a dog. The dog says woof woof!**' etc.

Encourage your child to make animal noises too. For example, saying the noises in 'Old McDonald had a Farm'.

Encourage your child to make noises for cars, trains and emergency vehicles when playing with them or when you see and hear them outside.

Imitate the noises of things round the house. For example, door bells, clocks, phones, and during play (eg snoring, drinking etc). Encourage your child to do the same.

Remember to have fun!

The Down's Syndrome Association provides information and support on all aspects of living with Down's syndrome.

We also work to champion the rights of people with Down's syndrome, by campaigning for change and challenging discrimination.

A wide range of Down's Syndrome Association publications can be downloaded free of charge from our website.

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