



**Down's Syndrome
Association**

A Registered Charity No. 1061474

Communication Series



D1. Early Language: Developing Understanding

Understanding Words, Understanding Sentences

A Down's Syndrome Association publication

Our resources and 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

Developing Understanding

Children usually find it easier to understand nouns (the names of objects) before they understand verbs ('doing' words such as eat, sleep, cry).

The following ideas will help your child to understand what you say to her:

1. Gain eye contact by saying your child's name, or a useful phrase (eg 'look at mummy/daddy!').

You may need to help your child to pay attention.

You may need to stop what your child is doing to ensure he is fully listening and paying attention.

2. Break down the instructions into small steps

Children with Down's syndrome often find it difficult to remember and act upon more than one piece of information at a time.

3. Use visual cues to assist your child's understanding and recall

Cues might include signs, gestures, pictures, symbols and written words. At this stage we are focusing on developing early language skills, so objects, photos or pictures are most useful to teach new vocabulary. Later on, symbols and written words may be useful.

4. Check if your child has understood your question or instruction

You can check understanding by watching your child to see where she looks, what she reaches for or says/signs. Think about why your child might not understand. For example:

- New vocabulary was used
- Your child was distracted
- Your child couldn't see the item you were talking about
- Your child did not hear you
- Sentence too long or grammatically complex

5. Create opportunities

Observe your child at play, during daily routines and out and about. See what he is interested in. Comment on what he is looking at, playing with or doing.

6. Small bursts of structured activities

To introduce new vocabulary, try some of the structured activities described below. Keep these activities short so your child doesn't lose focus. Try to keep activities engaging and fun for you both.

7. Reinforce vocabulary in everyday activities.

It is essential that new language is generalised to lots of different situations. Some children learn new vocabulary in one context (e.g. during a structured activity at home) but they do not use their new vocabulary in other contexts. Think about the vocabulary your child is practising in speech and language therapy, or targets you have set at home. Make sure you practise the same words in lots of different situations.

8. Use the new vocabulary as often as possible
9. Make your own language very simple. Use short, clear sentences. Emphasise key words.
10. Use pauses between phrases. Give your child extra time to understand what you are saying.
11. Slow down your speech.
12. Give choices to your child. For example, if working on his understanding of 'teddy' you can ask your child: 'Would you like the teddy or the cup?'
13. Encourage, praise and reward your child for all attempts at communication.

Understanding about understanding

What is a Key/Information Carrying Word?

A key word is one which your child must understand before he can carry out an instruction. It contains the important information in a sentence (not a 'little word' like 'the', 'put', 'a' etc.). Nouns and verbs are key words, as well as words for concepts (eg colours) and prepositions (eg 'in', 'under'). This section concentrates on early key words which includes nouns and then verbs. Concept words come later.

Your child may be very good at working out what you are saying from the context of what you are doing, as well as from the language. For example, you are putting on your coat and say:

'Go and get your coat and shoes, we're going to the park.'

In this example, your child may have anticipated and followed the instruction from the situation and routine (eg seeing you put on your coat and pick up your keys), but has not understood the words. In order to teach language, keep in mind the need to take away cues so he has to understand the words.

Show your Child

Before asking your child to carry out the activities described below, make sure you show the child what you are asking him/her to do, so that the child knows what to expect. This is called a bridging activity.



What is a Bridging Activity?

At first you will need to 'bridge' your child from understanding one word to understanding two words. To do this, when you ask your child to complete any of the activities described below, help him by 'giving' him the key word. For example, in the first activity described below, ask:

'give me teddy'

You must say this while you are handing over the teddy to your child, in order for him to give this back to you. By doing this, you have reduced the instruction. When you have done this a few times and your child is successful, then stop giving the cues and see how he gets on! If your child finds reaching and holding difficult you can ask 'show me teddy' or 'where is teddy?' and see if your child looks at the teddy.

Teaching vocabulary

We can think of early vocabulary in categories, eg animals, food, toys, body parts and verbs ('doing' words). You do not need to teach one category at a time, but it may help to keep a checklist of words your child understands. Support your child's understanding with signs and pictures.

[When you start teaching new words you can use the DSA Symbolic Sounds and Early Vocabulary list.](#)

When introducing a new word have the real object or a toy available for your child to touch and explore. For example, if teaching 'cow', give your child a toy cow to hold and look at. Children with Down's syndrome benefit from lots of visual cues so you could show him a picture of a cow too and look at books about cows! Talk about the item or picture, say and sign the word.

When your child is familiar with the target word try the bridging activity. When your child understands the word during the bridging activity you can help consolidate his/her understanding by taking away the cues.

Put a teddy and ball in front of your child and say, *'give me the teddy'* and see if your child will look at or reach for the teddy. This example has two items which are physically very different. Remember it may be more difficult for your child to understand the difference between physically similar items, e.g. an orange and apple, orange and ball or cow and horse.

When teaching similar items, you may need to spend more time teaching the word by using objects, pictures, books and real items, before you ask your child to follow your instruction without cues.

Ideas and games for teaching vocabulary

Structured activities to develop understanding vocabulary can include pulling objects out of a bag, naming them, signing the word and letting your child explore the item. You can also sing songs and rhymes, post picture cards and use structured play activities. Here are some topic based examples:

Body Parts: Eyes, Hair, Mouth, Nose, Hand, Foot

At first, give your child 'cues' such as looking at or pointing towards the item. Gradually reduce these cues as your child learns how to play the games. Always ensure that your child is looking at your face when you speak to her. This supports your child to focus her attention and helps her to succeed. Some initial ideas are outlined below.

1. Matching Game

You point to a body part on yourself and name it, then point to the same part on your child and name it. As your child gets used to the game, pause before pointing to eg your own tummy and see if your child will then look or point to his own tummy or your tummy.

2. Nursery Rhymes and Songs

Sing rhymes which include body parts, eg:

'This is the way we brush our hair, wash our hands, stamp our feet etc.'
(To the tune of 'Here we go round the mulberry bush')

'Heads, shoulders, knees and toes'

'If you're happy and you know it...'

3. Getting Washed

When bathing your child play a game of telling him which part you will wash next. Use intonation to make your voice exciting and maintain your child's interest. At first look at the part you are naming as you approach eg

"I'll wash that nose - where's that nose - there it is!"

Later, give your child time to find the named part - this will show that your child is listening to the word you use.

4. Washing Teddy

Take a cloth and tell your child which part you are going to wash. At first, point to the area. Later, simply tell your child so she can either find it for you or wash it herself. Ask your child what she is washing to encourage her to use the word.

Clothes: socks, gloves, shoes, shirt, jumper, trousers, coat, hat etc.

1. Matching clothes

Make a collection of clothes with two of each item (eg two socks, two hats, two jumpers). Put one set of clothes in a bag and the other on the floor. Take one item from the bag, show it to your child and tell him the name. See if your child can find the matching item from the set on the floor. At first your child may need you to point it out to him. Encourage your child to attempt to say or sign the name, or use hand over hand signing.

2. Find it

This time use just one set of clothes. Can your child find the item you name? Help your child by pointing to it first.

3. Getting dressed

When your child is getting dressed, encourage her to bring her clothes to you. Spread them out and tell your child what to fetch next. Try asking your child 'What do we need next?' to encourage her to tell you.

4. Dressing Teddy

Play a game of dressing the teddy. Tell your child which item to put on Teddy and see if he finds the right item. You can sing 'Teddy's got his shoe on' (to the tune of 'The sun has got his hat on') as you put on each item.



Toys and Every Day Objects - Car, Ball, Brush, Cup, Teddy ... etc.

1. Matching game

Play the game described under 'Matching clothes' using toys or objects. You can also play 'Fetch it'.

2. Turn-Taking Game

Have a ball and a car. Put both toys on the floor near you, with your child sitting a little distance away. Tell your child which one you are going to push to your child, each time pointing to him as well. On his turn at pushing to you, tell your child which one you want, again pointing, if necessary.

3. Hide It

Hide some toys around the room and ask your child to find the one you name. Later you can get your child to just look and name the one she finds.

5. Pictures

To help your child recognise pictures, you may at first have to practise object-picture matching. Have a selection of objects and a picture of each object. See if your child can match the one you say.

You can play with the DSA pictures for animals, toys, vehicles, food and drink.

Colour photos are the easiest to recognise, followed by black and white photos, then clear simple colour pictures and finally more 'abstract' drawings (eg. pencil sketches).

6. Action game

Use a teddy and some objects you can play with (eg. brush, cup, cloth etc.). Ask your child to do something with teddy, e.g. 'Give teddy a drink/brush', 'Brush teddy's hair' etc.

7. Books

Look at simple picture books with your child and encourage her to find objects you name.

People – for example, family members

1. Give Away

Ask your child to give a brick to someone eg. 'Give daddy a brick' etc. When everyone has lots of bricks, build towers. Then tell your child whose tower he should knock down! Later, ask your child whose tower he would like to knock down to encourage him to name people.

2. Whose shoe

Each person takes off a shoe and puts it in a bag.

Let your child take one shoe out and tell her who the shoe belongs to, pointing if necessary.

Later, she can tell you whose shoe she has found



3. Sharing

Ask your child to offer biscuits, blueberries etc. to people you name. Later, he can tell you who he will give a biscuit to.

Action Words

1. Start with simple action words eg. eating, sleeping, jumping.

These are common verbs and your child can see them happening every day. Your child may even be able to act them out.

While playing outside, talk about what you and the child are doing. For example:

'Look, I'm jumping.'
'Look, Ben's jumping.'

2. Carry out an action and ask your child to join in. For example:

'I'm washing.'
'Now we're washing.'

3. Describe what your child is doing as he plays. For example:

'Teddy's sleeping'

4. Ask your child to carry out actions with their toys. For example:

'Make teddy jump'
'Make dolly sleep'

Then reverse the roles and see if your child can tell you what actions to carry out.

5. Sing nursery rhymes or action songs. For example:

'The wheels on the bus go round and round.'

6. Look through picture books and talk about the different actions in the pictures.

Ask your child to point out different pictures. For example:

'Find someone who is jumping.'

Talk about the actions when they occur so your child can learn the word.

Understanding sentences

As language understanding and 'working memory' skills develop, children are able to remember and understand more information.

Speech and Language Therapists often talk about 'information carrying' or 'key' words. This refers to how much language information a child can understand. They may suggest games to practise remembering and understanding of increasing amounts of language information, based on your child's current stage in development. [1]

To know the number of information carrying words in a sentence, we must think about how much of the spoken instruction is not important because of information available in the context.

In other words, how many of the words the child has to understand and remember in order to follow the instruction, rather than working out what to do from the context.

For example *'Put teddy on the table'* can be:

1. A one information carrying word phrase if your child has a choice of a **teddy** and a rabbit with a table; or a teddy with a **table** and a bed.
2. A two information carrying word phrase if your child has a choice of a **teddy** and a rabbit with a **table** and a bed.
3. A three information carrying word phrase if your child has a choice of a **teddy** and a rabbit with a **table** and a bed and knows that he/she can put it **on** or under.

Understanding two words together

The following activities will help to develop your child's understanding of two key words.

You may use these activities in your daily life to help your child develop and generalise her understanding. At first, you can spend about ten minutes a day, choosing a couple of activities to practise together. Later, you can use these strategies throughout the day. You can also invent your own games, following the principles outlined, with your child's favourite toys and objects, at home and out and about.

These activities give some ideas of different games to practise. Each one tells you what toys you need but you can vary this, as long as you still have the same number and type of items. So you can swap 'teddy' and 'dolly' for 'dog' and 'ball' etc.



Be sure your child understands each of the individual words before you include them in a sentence with other words.

Two nouns together

A	Toys	dolly, teddy, chair, table
	Ask	'Put dolly on the chair', 'put bear on the table' etc.
B	Toys	dolly, teddy, some objects (eg. spoon, car, brick)
	Ask	'Give the brick to dolly', 'give the car to teddy' etc.
C	Toys	Dolly, teddy, toothbrush, hairbrush
	Ask	'Brush dolly's teeth', 'brush teddy's hair' etc.
D	Toys	Teddy with his cup and plate, dolly with her cup and plate.
	Ask	'Where's teddy's cup?', 'Where's dolly's plate?' etc.

E	Toys	Picture of a man, lady, teddy, dolly or dog
	Ask	'Where's the dog's ears?', 'Where's the man's foot?' etc.
F	Toys	Some animals, box, field
	Ask	'Put the cow in the field', 'Put the horse in the box' etc.
G	Toys	dolly, teddy, clothes for each
	Ask	'Where are dolly's socks?', 'Where's teddy's jumper?' etc.

Two key word activities can be practised with family members or when sorting the laundry, e.g. 'Where's Mummy's jumper?', 'Where are Daddy's socks?' etc.

Noun and Action Word Together

Verbs are very important in a sentence. Examples of verbs are: sit, run, walk, jump, drink, eat, read, push, pull, brush, wash, sleep, play, look, draw, dress etc.

A	Toys	Teddy and dolly
	Ask	'Make teddy run', 'make dolly sleep' etc
B	Toys	dolly, teddy, some 'doing' objects (eg. brush, pen, flannel, book)
	Ask	'Make dolly read', 'make teddy draw' etc.
	or	'brush teddy', 'wash dolly' etc.
C	Toys	dolly, table, chair
	Ask	'Make dolly jump on the chair', 'Make dolly sit on the table' etc.

When your child understands size words (big/little), colours (red, blue, green, yellow), prepositions (on, in, under) or shape words (triangle, circle, square) you can include these in language understanding games.

1. Knowles,W and Masidlover,M (1982) The Derbyshire Language Scheme.
<https://www.derbyshire-language-scheme.co.uk/>

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.

Contact us

Down's Syndrome Association

National Office

Langdon Down Centre,
2a Langdon Park, Teddington,
Middlesex, TW11 9PS

t. 0333 1212 300

f. 020 8614 5127

e. info@downs-syndrome.org.uk

w. www.downs-syndrome.org.uk

Wales

t. 0333 1212 300

e. wales@downs-syndrome.org.uk

Northern Ireland

Unit 2, Marlborough House,
348 Lisburn Road,
Belfast BT9 6GH

t. 02890 665260

f. 02890 667674

e. enquiriesni@downs-syndrome.org.uk



www.dsactive.org



www.dsworkfit.org.uk



www.langdondownmuseum.org.uk



www.langdondowncentre.org.uk



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