When my daughter, Riley, was first learning to listen and talk, I was amazed at how quickly our auditory-verbal therapist could come up with ways to continue therapy at home. Whenever I tried to come up with games to boost her language skills, I just drew a blank. We were under enough pressure as it was, making sure her cochlear implants were working properly, making sure she wore the processors...we had to be creative too?

Thankfully, there are plenty of resources available to help your child learn to listen and speak at home. Here are a few games you can play with your child using everyday items.

**Off to a Good Start**

When you’re just starting, one of the first things you should do is introduce the relationship between sounds and objects. These basic sounds are what I know as the “Learning to Listen” sounds. View examples of the different sounds.

For instance, if you say “buh buh buh,” you would show your child a bus. For “quack quack,” you would show a duck. And so on. After you introduce a few sounds, you can start some auditory recall games to see if your child is making the connection between the sounds and the objects.

The main thing to remember at the early stages is input, input, input. The more you talk to your child, the more he or she will listen and learn. If a child never hears a word, you cannot expect him or her to say it.

**Plop It in the Water**

For this game, you’ll need a small glass bowl or fishbowl about half full of water, small plastic toys that represent the Learning to Listen Sounds, and a towel, because if your child is anything like mine you’re in for a big splash.

To play, say a sound and have your child pick out the matching toy. When he picks the correct toy, let him drop it into the water. Continue until he gets all the sounds right.

A variation is to use picture cards and marbles instead of toys. Just have your child point to the correct card and let him plop a marble into the water.

Another game to play utilizing Learning to Listen sounds is to show your child a toy and have her make the corresponding sound. Show her a cow and have her say “moo.” Show her a car and have her say “brrr beep beep.” Point to the clock and have her say “tick tock.”

**Guess What’s in the Box**

If your child is older, you can play games that focus on descriptive terms. You’ll need a box filled with items your child is familiar with, a barrier so your child can’t see what you pull out, and some kind of reward, such as a piece of candy or some other small treat.

Choose a toy from the box and describe it: “It’s brown. It’s an animal. It has four legs. It can run and jump. It says ‘neigh neigh.’ It has a long tail.” You can also sneek in some new vocabulary, such as “mane,” “gallop,” and “hooves.” When your child guesses correctly, offer a small treat.
Reverse the rules and have your child pull a toy from the box and describe it to you, letting you guess. But don’t guess too quickly. Give your child time to describe the object in as much detail as possible.

As your child’s vocabulary grows, add new toys and expand your descriptions. You can group items into themes too, such as cooking, cleaning, bedtime and bath time items.

**Follow the Directions**

To teach the concept of place, have your child follow simple directions using words like “over” and “under,” “in” and “out,” “in front of” and “behind,” “beside” and “next to,” “on top of” and “above,” “between” and “in the middle of,” and “on” and “in.”

For example, tell your child, “Put the book on top of the table.”
“Take your doll and put her in front of the radio.”

“Put your race car under the chair beside the door.”

You can also switch sides and have your child tell you what to do. However, occasionally mess up and have him correct you. For instance, when he says, “Put the car under the box,” put it on top of the box, feign ignorance and let him tell you the right way to do it. My daughter loves to correct me when I don’t follow her directions, and it is good language practice.

**Pretend Play**

When you want to focus on conversation skills, grab your child’s Barbies or superhero figures and start talking. Set up a room for the dolls and let them have a conversation.

Maybe Barbie is just getting off the bus and Mom Barbie wants to know how school went. The following is a sample script, but a script isn’t necessary as long as your child responds in an appropriate manner.

Mom: “Hi, Barbie.”
Child: “Hi, Mom.”
Mom: “Did you read a story today?”
Child: “Yes.”
Mom: “What story did you read? What was it about?”
Child: “We read ‘The Three Little Pigs,’ and it was about three pigs and a big wolf that chased them and blew down their houses.”

Make your questions specific and try to get as many details from your child as you can. Ask about what she had for lunch, whom she played with on the playground, what the science lesson was about, etc.

**Let Your Child Take the Lead**

As your child continues developing spoken language, notice what motivates him or her to learn and use those things in your everyday teaching.

If he likes books, incorporate those by having him make an experience book – photograph him doing a favorite activity, put the pictures in a small book and let him tell others the story. If sports are your daughter’s passion, print a softball field and have her answers correspond to a single, double, triple and home run. Riley likes board games, so we use those in our language practice.

Language games don’t have to be complicated – just try to make them fun and age-appropriate. Eventually, your child will outgrow the games and you will enjoy having everyday conversations together…without all the work.

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