

# TIP SHEET 2

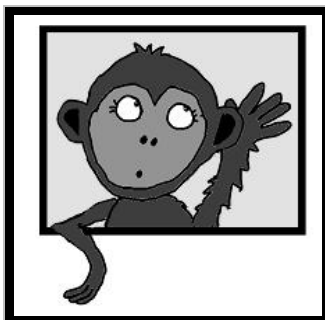


The advice given on this tip sheet is by Lucia Smith, Speech Pathologist.

It is based on experience from her clinical work along with her work consulting with teachers and parents.

It is difficult to address all children's communication styles in a single tip sheet.

If you are concerned about your child's speech or language development, please see a speech pathologist.



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## HELPING MY CHILD UNDERSTAND ME

1. First thing's first... if your child cannot hear properly, they will have trouble understanding you. Not only may some sounds be muffled, but they may miss out on developing vital listening skills. These listening skills, that develop as the child grows, include attending to longer sentences and filtering out background noise. **HAVE YOUR CHILD'S HEARING TESTED. TAKE YOUR CHILD TO THE DOCTOR WHEN YOU SUSPECT THEY HAVE AN EAR INFECTION.**
2. When something is difficult, we have to concentrate harder to do it. This applies to listening and understanding too. If language is difficult for a child, that child needs more energy than others to attend to it and will therefore tire more quickly than others. This can be why children who have difficulty listening "switch off" or start being silly. For this reason, give your child the best opportunity to focus on listening. Turn off background noise and remove visual distraction. At the same time, acknowledge when they are starting to tire and change the activity to one that does not involve listening and responding to language. **MAKE IT EASIER FOR YOUR CHILD TO LISTEN. GIVE THEM A BREAK WHEN THEY NEED IT.**
3. All humans have a limit to the length of information they are able to process. You know yourself, when you are given a long list of numbers, you have a limit to how many you can recall. For example, you, as an adult, may only be able to hear, hold on to and repeat 6 or 7 numbers. When we hear words in sentences, however, adults can usually remember more than 6 or 7 words. "On Saturday morning I went down to the shop and bought some apples, pears and bananas." That's a lot of words but it's quite easy for an adult to remember. This is because we let the meaning help us. We also allow our knowledge of sentence structure give us hints about what type of words occur in certain positions. Children who have difficulties with language may have trouble with meaning and/or sentence structure. They are therefore relying more on their memory of what is said to them. As a general rule, young children should be able to remember a sentence that is three words longer than their age. This shows, even for youngsters who are

developing normally, that we really need to *shorten our messages*. For children who have difficulty with language, this is even more important. When it is necessary to say a long sentence, make sure you use **chunking**.

Chunking is a way of making longer sentences shorter. *Pretend that a sentence is like a piece of bread. If you had to feed this piece of bread to a young toddler, you wouldn't put the whole thing in their mouth. You'd break the bread into chunks, watch for them to finish chewing and then feed the next chunk. This should be the same with sentences.* When speaking to a child, break your sentences into small "chunks". Leave a pause (for the child to process the information), and then continue. This takes a bit of practise but is extremely important.

"Get your library bag out of the playroom and put it on the bench" could be chunked like this: "Get your library bag.... From the playroom.... Then put it on the bench."

### **CHUNKING IS IMPORTANT. SHORTEN YOUR SENTENCES.**

4. Some adults speak very quickly. It's an interesting exercise to tape yourself talking with your child and check your rate. Time and time again, I have shown parents, how slowing down speech, can result in their child following more directions. Play around with your rate of speech. It may *feel* a bit unnatural at first, but you can actually slow down a lot without *sounding* unnatural. **SLOW DOWN.**



5. Keep your voice sounding interesting. Use lots of ups and downs and pauses. Stress important words. Vary your loudness. (Sometimes whispering will draw a child into listening more carefully). Children generally respond more to a speaker who is animated. **USE AN INTERESTING VOICE.**
6. Repeat words or phrases that are important. For example, if you want your child to get their blue bag from the laundry and you know there are several bags in the laundry, you could say... "Go and grab your *blue bag*... from the laundry... your *blue bag*, OK?" Use repetition if you are trying to promote new words also. For example, "This beast is... *ravenous*...he's so hungry, he's *ravenous*..." **REPEAT REPEAT REPEAT!**
7. Many children who are weak in the auditory field (hearing/processing speech) benefit from visual "helpers". These visual "helpers" include:
  - **gestures** such as shrugging the shoulders, pointing and nodding.
  - **facial expression** can also help add meaning to the words you are speaking.
  - **objects or picture cues**; picking up a cup and saying "Would you like a drink?" (object cue) or showing a picture or photo of kindergarten and saying "It's time for kinder." \*
  - **key-word sign language** (like Makaton); learning and using sign language can supplement your spoken words \*
  - **drawing pictures**; I find that for some children, it really helps to draw a quick picture as I explain something. For example, you may be explaining about lining up next to the stairs when the bell goes. As you talk to your child, draw some stick figures standing in a line next to some stairs. You don't have to be an artist!

### **USE VISUAL HELPERS.**

*\*You may need assistance in setting up a visual system to supplement your speech. For example, not all children will recognise pictures and may need photos, whereas some children may not recognise photos and may need object cues. A speech pathologist can offer advice in this area.*

8. Being consistent can really help a child's understanding, particularly if they have language difficulties. Using the same words and gestures in certain situations can be beneficial, particularly for youngsters. For example, every time it's time to pack away toys, you might say "Okey Dokey... pack away" as you do a gesture for packing away. You might even use the same sing-song tone each time you say this.

Also try for consistency across settings and between different people. Discuss any strategies that work with the main people in your child's life. Consider this: Dad speaks slowly, Mum speaks quickly, the kinder teacher uses sign language, but the childcare staff use pictures. If your child has understanding problems, a combined approach will help.

**BE CONSISTENT.**

9. Prepare your child for listening. Particularly when you are about to say something important, make sure your child is ready to listen. You may have a special "routine" for this. You might say their name and wait for them to look at you, then squat down to their level. (I find getting down to a child's level works really well). You might then say "Listen" as you make a listening gesture ... Next use all your other wonderful strategies to deliver a clear message. **GET YOUR CHILD READY FOR LISTENING.**

10. Lastly, be aware of the *type of language and concepts* you are using. Don't use too many tricky words that your child doesn't understand. (When you do, make sure you explain what the tricky words mean). Avoid concepts that are difficult for some children to understand such as "tomorrow", "last week" and so on. Your child will be able to understand more when you talk about the "here and now". Think about the order of your sentences too. "The dog was chased by the goat" is harder to understand than "The goat chased the dog." "We'll go to Nan's after we go to the pool" is harder than "We'll go to the pool and then to Nan's". Try and keep your speech in the same order that something happens. **THINK ABOUT THE LANGUAGE YOU ARE USING.**

"My First Barrier Games ©" from PELICAN TALK SPEECH THERAPY RESOURCES is a great resource for practising careful listening. It also teaches 23 concepts such as "behind", "next to", "big", "little".  
See the website for details.



If you have any questions or feedback regarding the tips given above,  
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