



ALLEGHENY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

## Use Your Words to Educate Parents and Caregivers: A TRAINING GUIDE FOR PROFESSIONALS

### WORKING TOGETHER

At the [Allegheny County Department of Human Services \(DHS\)](#), we want to get families in our communities talking. **But we need your help.**

As someone who works with parents and caregivers of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, you likely see parents every day who ask what they should be doing to get their little ones off to a good start. While they may be focusing on developmental milestones such as sitting up or crawling, take the time to suggest another priority: enhancing language experience and emotional development through the simple act of talking.

As you know, the first teachers and role models for children are their parents and caregivers, and as such, they have a strong influence on their learning. In fact, children learn better from parents, caregivers, and other family members than anything else—including educational television or interactive electronic devices.

When parents and caregivers talk to their children, the children reap benefits in speech and language development—as well as family bonding—that last a lifetime. And nothing can replace human interaction.

This is the basis for the DHS [“Use Your Words: Your Baby is Listening and Learning” campaign](#). As a professional to whom parents go for advice and counsel, you can convey the tremendous benefits of talking to children early and often.

### IDENTIFYING OPPORTUNITIES

Ask any parent or caregiver if they talk to their children and they’re likely to respond, “Of course.” But parents tend to overestimate how much verbal interaction they’re really having.

The good news for families is that they don’t have to be experts in child development to be good communicators. **They just have to talk.** And it’s important to frame it in this way so that parents don’t feel tasked with finding yet more time to be a “good” parent.

Parents will likely look to you as a resource for getting started. Do a little brainstorming with them, and put your advice in the context of what you know about them ... where they live, who their family members are, what they do on the weekends, and other details.

Once you know these things, you can suggest the appropriate tips from among the following 13 strategies to start the dialogue, no matter where a family lives or who else is in the home.



For more information about Use Your Words, visit: [WWW.ALLEGHENYCOUNTY.US/DHS/USE-YOUR-WORDS.ASPX](http://WWW.ALLEGHENYCOUNTY.US/DHS/USE-YOUR-WORDS.ASPX)

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services is responsible for providing and administering publicly funded human services to county residents. Visit [www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs](http://www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs)

## IF YOU HAVE AN INFANT ...

1. **Try new words.** They can be exciting for little ears, and pique their interest. For unfamiliar, challenging words, try to provide a bit of context. For example, if you are going to use the word “xylophone,” have one on hand that you can show.
2. **Use nonverbal gestures and facial expressions to help explain meaning.** If you are using words like “happy” or “joyful,” be sure to smile and convey these feelings.
3. **Smile and look at your baby when talking.** If he or she tries to imitate you, say the word again.
4. **Look out for your baby’s “conversation starters”**—i.e., gazing at you and burbling—and respond by talking. If these signals are ignored, babies will eventually stop making them, but your consistent responsiveness will encourage your baby to engage you.
5. **Use a stroller that allows your baby to face you.** Some research has shown that when a child is facing the person pushing, he or she is twice as likely to talk.

## IF YOU HAVE A TODDLER ...

6. **Read to your toddler whenever you can.** Take time to go over “big” or new words, using pictures from a book or even items around your home to help them understand what the word means.
7. **Sing it!** Singing helps children see the relationship between words and music, and lets parents and caregivers introduce new vocabulary words playfully.
8. **Play games.** Games like Peek-a-Boo or Pat-a-Cake help your baby learn new sounds and new ways to interact with you. Other games, like show and tell, allow babies to associate words with objects, animal attributes, and people.
9. **Encourage older children to chime in.** Ask open-ended questions and encourage everyone to take a turn at sharing their thoughts in a conversation or participate in a game.

## IF YOU HAVE A PRESCHOOLER ...

10. **Bring your child into the action.** For instance, when doing laundry, ask which are his or her favorite pajamas, and why. When cooking, ask about foods he or she likes.
11. **Use your environment.** The supermarket is a great place to go over colors, textures, and types of foods. Similarly, if you go to the drugstore, you can touch on words like “well,” “sick,” or “medicine.”
12. **Speak more than one language.** If you are bilingual, there is no reason not to use both languages with your young children. They are excellent learners when it comes to new languages and can process ideas in more than one!
13. **As long as you are nurturing a positive and caring conversation, there is no “wrong” way to talk to your child.** Watching the Steelers game? Point out the different uniforms, read the numbers on the field, talk about great games you remember.

## WHAT ELSE?

For parents who are looking for more reasons to prioritize talking, the American Academy of Pediatrics' Council on Early Childhood recently published [recommendations about talking to children for the pediatric community](#) based on a research study appearing in the journal *Pediatrics*. You could have this article on hand when you introduce the notion of talking more to the parents you see.

The more you repeat something, the more it sinks in, so it could prove helpful to have the facts on hand. Parents can read more about the value of talking to their children and embrace this as something that is good for the whole family.

You can also:

- Hang posters that promote reading or show parents interacting with very young children
- Promote the “5 Rs” of early education: reading, rhyming, routines, rewards, and relationships
- Tweet about the value of talking to young children using #UseYourWords

### Dig deeper at ...

[www.lenababy.com/Study.aspx](http://www.lenababy.com/Study.aspx)

[www.lenafoundation.org/TechReport.aspx/PowerOfTalk/LTR-01-2](http://www.lenafoundation.org/TechReport.aspx/PowerOfTalk/LTR-01-2)

[www.aapnews.aappublications.org/content/early/2014/06/24/aapnews.20140624-2/](http://www.aapnews.aappublications.org/content/early/2014/06/24/aapnews.20140624-2/)

## ABOUT DHS

DHS is responsible for providing and administering publicly funded human services to county residents. For more information, visit [www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/use-your-words.aspx](http://www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/use-your-words.aspx).

### Content for the Use Your Words campaign is sourced from the following:

The University of Kansas – *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young American Children*.

Brookes Publishing: Boston MA. Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, authors

ZERO TO THREE

The National Literacy Trust (UK)