



ALLEGHENY COUNTY DEPARTMENT OF HUMAN SERVICES

Use Your Words to Educate Parents and Caregivers: AN INTRODUCTION FOR PROFESSIONALS

WHY IS TALKING TO INFANTS AND TODDLERS IMPORTANT?

In 1995, Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, researchers at the University of Kansas, released [findings from a longitudinal study](#) they conducted of parent-child talk in families in Kansas over a decade. Having studied parent-child talk among children from 7 months to 36 months of age, Hart and Risley followed up with these same children at age 9.

Their research demonstrated a definitive link between the **amount of words children heard** from birth to age 3 and their **academic success** at age 9. They found that:

- The more babies hear from their parents and caregivers—no matter the topic—the better their communication will be when they begin using their own words.
- Talking to babies and toddlers is one of the best ways to nurture their brain development.
- Reading regularly with babies and toddlers strengthens parent-child relationships at a critical time in child development, which builds social-emotional skills that last a lifetime.

[The LENA Research Foundation conducted a study](#) showing that parents and caregivers often overestimate the amount they talk to their babies and toddlers. Since we know from the Kansas research that the more you can say, the better, it is important to make a concerted effort to get parents talking, whenever and wherever possible.

In June 2014, the [American Academy of Pediatrics \(AAP\) announced a new policy](#) recommending that pediatric providers advise parents to read aloud to their infants from birth. The benefits, says AAP, include strengthening language skills, literacy development, and parent-child relationships.

HOW DOES ALLEGHENY COUNTY FIT IN?

Recognizing the importance of the research, the [Allegheny County Department of Human Services \(DHS\)](#) has launched a campaign to encourage talking with babies, toddlers, and young children (birth to 5 years old) as a priority in our community, so that our children have the greatest possible chance at positive academic and emotional outcomes.

An important principle for “[Use Your Words: Your Baby is Listening and Learning](#)” is to support parents and caregivers as they raise their children, not give them another task to stress over or another to-do on their already long list. As such, DHS has provided strategies on how to make verbal interaction more frequent by wrapping around what families are likely doing every day already.



For more information about Use Your Words, visit: 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

WHAT THE TOOLKIT CONTAINS

This toolkit offers training materials that you can use to educate yourself and the parents and caregivers you see about the benefits of talking to their babies, toddlers, and young children. Some are simply informational while others are designed to be interactive.

Have fun **Using Your Words!**

Note: Some tools in this kit break down activities and conversation starters by the age of the child. This is because a parent might interact with an infant differently than with a toddler or preschooler.

TOOLS FOR YOU

1. Use Your Words to Educate Parents and Caregivers: A Training Guide for Professionals

- Use this piece to brush up on the research and impetus behind the Use Your Words campaign.
- Review the questions to ask parents about their routines and family life and come up with a few of your own that you would be comfortable asking.
- Digest the age-specific recommendations on how to facilitate more verbal communication.

2. Use Your Words Poster and Flier

- Print the files from the Use Your Words campaign website at www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/use-your-words.aspx and post them in your office space.
- Posting Use Your Words materials in your office space where you visit with parents and caregivers may prompt them to ask you about the campaign and give you the opportunity to start the conversation about the importance of talking to their babies and young children.

TOOLS FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

1. Use Your Words Tip Sheet: Having Fun With Words

- Review the conversation starters with parents and caregivers you see. Although the dialogue is broken out by age, review the entire list to see if some things can cross over.
- Make copies of the tip sheet for parents to take home and encourage them to tack it up in a high-traffic area, like the kitchen, so they will remember how they can Use Their Words!
- Encourage parents to download and share the materials at www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/use-your-words.aspx.

2. Use Your Words Tip Sheet: Activities for You and Your Little One

- Read through the activities proposed and consider which would be good suggestions for the parents and families you know.
- Think about other activities that are easy, free, and would encourage verbal interaction.
- Review the ideas with parents and caregivers and give them a copy to take home. Encourage them to fill in their own ideas at the end.

3. Use Your Words Brochure

- Print the file from the Use Your Words campaign website at www.alleghenycounty.us/dhs/use-your-words.aspx and give it to parents and caregivers.
- Sharing and word-of-mouth are critical ways to spread Use Your Words messages and tips. Encourage parents and caregivers to download and share the brochure.

4. Use Your Words: Resources and References for Professionals, Parents, and Caregivers

- Give the Resources and References handout to parents who ask about the research that backs up the messaging and recommendations in the Use Your Words campaign. Encourage them to access these resources to learn more.

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)