



Using Activities of Daily Living to Foster Language/Communication Development

Contributed by [Beverly Vicker](#), Speech Language Clinician

An earlier IRCA article entitled Opportunity to Communicate: A Crucial Aspect of Fostering Communication Development (Vicker, 2006) addressed the importance of balancing communication opportunities and concerns such as your child's level of independence and self-regulation. This article will provide specific examples of how to take advantage of natural opportunities for communication exchanges and language development. Each situation will need to be adjusted for specific children. Possible general outcomes include the following:

- Building receptive and expressive vocabulary;
- Facilitating responses in an expressive mode- vocal, sign, gesture, pictorial use;
- Encouraging initiation of responses; and
- Encouraging interaction.

Activity: Bath Time

Bath time or shower time is a necessary, frequent occurring activity. As such, it presents numerous opportunities for learning with little pre-planning. In this article, the focus is on bath time since this mode of getting clean is usually the preferred method favored by most young children and their parents.

Vocabulary

The following words are naturals within this activity time. Rather than focus on all of the vocabulary, choose a few words and use them often within the given activity. Show multiple examples of the vocabulary or concept, when possible. Whenever your child seems to have made the association of the label with an action or object, move on to target new words. Be sure to review old words periodically, however. If your child does not seem to understand the words you selected after a few weeks, choose some others that may better match his or her interest or focus during bath time. Possibilities include:

- Tub, bathtub or shower (place)
- Bath or shower (action/activity)
- Water
- Faucet
- Hot/cold/ OK (temperature of water, room, child)
- Body parts- face, arms, hands, chest, tummy, feet, back, ears, hair, and so forth
- Names of toys available for play
- Towel
- Soap
- Shampoo
- Rug/mat
- Wash, splash, pour, sink, float, and other actions with toys or child

- Clean/dirty
- Wet/dry
- Bubbles (appearance), bubble bath, bubbles (solution)
- In/out (child or water in tub)
- Empty/all gone (water); drain
- Take off clothes (names them, name colors, characteristics of shirt- logo, favorite, etc.)
- Dry various body parts (review the name as you dry them)
- Put on pajamas and other items of clothing (name them as you put them on)
- Hamper or basket

Use any of the vocabulary as single words or in short sentences with emphasis on the key word. Do not overwhelm your child with words or he or she will tune out your sincere teaching attempts.

Expressive Skills (May be verbal, gestural, sign, or pictures)

Expressive communication use stems from opportunities to give a message such as:

- Agreeing that the clothes are dirty or smelly while taking them off.
- Expressing a preference for one vs. another colored towel for the bath or shower.
- Expressing a choice of which body part Mom or Dad should wash next (out of a choice of two).
- Playfully correcting Mom or Dad who washes the wrong body part after a choice had been made.
- Selecting an action for a toy from a choice and announcing it as one does it – pour, sink, splash.
- Show something to parent who has not been part of the bath time activity. For example, Mom models how to call “Dad” so the child can show what he did with arranging play shapes on the tile or painted pictures from a paint-with-water book.
- Predict what will happen if toy boat is pushed down and let go- will float.
- Tell Mom or Dad to blow more bubbles to pop in the tub area.
- Tell Mom or Dad what favorite toy is missing from the bath toy net in the tub area. (Mom or Dad can deliberately but secretly remove something before bath-time to promote a need to communicate.)
- Violate a routine way your child plays with a toy and give him an opportunity to mildly protest.
- Introduce the idea of taking turns with play with a toy or pouring water. Ask whose turn it is.

Initiation

Allow time (at least 10-15 seconds) for the child to initiate before providing a model or cue. Use a gestural cue rather than a verbal cue when possible? For example, when asking about what to wash, a follow up cue, after a pause might be a point to the body parts in question and an exaggerated shoulder shrug/arm gesture for “I don’t know.”

Interaction

Depending on the challenges of a specific child, other novel routines can be introduced into the bath routine.

- Introduce short songs or finger-plays.
- Have competition over who can make the biggest splash (with adequate towels on the floor outside the tub) or blow the biggest bubble.
- Float empty plastic Easter eggs in the tub and take turns requesting by color or pointing; Mom or Dad and child take turns putting eggs into a bucket; parent comments on color.
- Race plastic fish in the tub by pushing them with one’s hand or with a spoon.

- Blow bubbles, as mentioned earlier. The child can request more bubbles or request a turn. Say “pop” as each bubble is burst.
- Take turns retrieving “treasure” from the bathtub and sort the loot. Put red, white, and blue poker chips into the tub. Take turns selecting a chip and putting it into a 6 unit muffin/cupcake pan. Guide the sorting treasure by making the task a matching task. Ahead of time, tape one chip into each of the 6 cupcake slots. Scoop up the chip for sorting with a miniature strainer or with one’s hand.
- Have a basketball hoop attached to the tile and take turns making baskets with a Nerf™ type of ball.
- Take turns squeezing out a sponge. Have a small plastic dish with a little water and a sponge. Put the sponge in and allow it to absorb all of the water. It looks like the water is all gone but with one or two squeezes, the water is back.

Of course, put the emphasis upon getting clean, smelling nice, feeling relaxed, and completing a routine that leads to bedtime. Bath time, however, can also be a natural time for language/communication learning. If your child gets somewhat stimulated by the play, he may be more communicative, especially if he is a low arousal child. If your child gets too over-stimulated and active, then you may wish to move the bath to an earlier time in the daily routine and put something that is more relaxing into the pre-bedtime time slot. It all depends on what communication skills your child currently has and what needs to be fostered.

Activity: Laundry Time

Whether you are encouraging your child to do social activities with you or whether you are teaching your student a daily living skill, doing laundry can be a time for language and communication growth.

Receptive Vocabulary

The words chosen to be modeled within the activity depend on the present vocabulary of the child and novelty of the task of doing laundry. Consider focusing on a few words until your child appears to understand them. Present the words in a teaching or information sharing manner. Avoid asking test questions since this strategy does not teach. So, say “There’s a spot. Let’s spray the spot. Looks like spaghetti- a spot of spaghetti. We’ll clean the spot.” Do not ask “What is that?” unless you are sure the child has the target word in his or her spontaneous expressive vocabulary. Possible words to target include:

- Washer
- Clothes and characteristics- zipper, buttons, pockets, belt,
- Names of specific clothes
- Colors of clothing- stay with the basics
- Selective patterns of clothing- stripes, dots, specific logos
- Ownership of each piece of clothing
- Dirty vs. clean vs. torn or needs to be fixed
- Spots- spray it, rub it
- Soap
- Water- hot, cold
- Dark vs. non-dark clothing-sort into piles
- Name of brand of detergent- logo
- Action words- sort, throw in, take out, close/open lid, spray, rub
- Set dial/timer
- Smell of clothes/detergent- yucky, nice
- Hamper/clothes basket- full/empty
- Buzzer- all done

Expressive Vocabulary/Expressive Skills

See the list of receptive vocabulary for expressive vocabulary possibilities. What is selected depends on the expressive system used and the amount of vocabulary the child presently has. With expressive vocabulary opportunities, the child is given time to comment, remind, provide information, and request.

For example, Mom could start the sorting activity by saying "Daddy's" as she puts his pajamas into a pile. After a few models, she might prompt the child by saying, "Whose is this? This belongs to ____?" She can pause for about 5-10 seconds and then answer the question herself as she models the response, "Yup, this is daddy's." Another option for a non-talker would be to have a display of family member photos. The child could point to the appropriate family member photo when given various pieces of clothing.

Other types of supports might be needed to assist the child to encourage expressive messages. For example, if Mom taped a picture of the dryer on the front of the appliance, the child could bring the picture to her when the dryer buzzer sounded.

As an example of literacy woven into the laundry routine, Mom could look at clothing instruction labels after the washing is complete. She could say "Yes, into the dryer" vs. "Nope, no dryer." Once the child knows the routine for the latter, he or she could be prompted to say a portion of, or sing something like "Rack, rack, rack; we need the rack." (for items that can not go into the dryer). The child could also just point to show where that wet piece of clothing must be taken.

Outcomes

Potential outcomes within the laundry activity include:

- Both the child and parent can enjoy a positive time together during what can otherwise be a non-favored-chore.
- Child can learn many new words and concepts.
- Child can become familiar with a routine; once familiar, he or she can cue Mom or whomever, if she misses a step or can remind of what comes next. Child could also eventually follow pictured sequence to promote independence.

- Child expands understanding of the world by noticing characteristics of clothes and ownership.
- Child can have a sense of pride about being a helper.
- Child can hear and practice syntax and word pronunciation, if that is a goal, in a naturalistic situation.
- Child can generalize concepts and vocabulary labels to real world items.
- Child can learn to read words that always occur within a particular context, for example, the word Tide on the familiar orange detergent container. (Environmentally based words are usually the first words a child learns to read).
- The young child will particularly like the concept of putting something into a container, i.e., dirty clothes into the washer or wet clothes into the dryer.

Many other natural language/communication opportunities are lurking in the home and in the community. The trick is to outline the possibilities and to make a good match with what is known about your child. Sometimes one can do these outlines in one's mind, as an activity occurs, and other times, it is helpful to see the possibilities on paper. This article represents an example of possibilities.

Reference

Vicker, B. (2006). Opportunity to communicate: A crucial aspect of fostering communication development. *The Reporter*, 11(2), 16-18.

Vicker, B. (2007). Using Activities of Daily Living to Foster Language/Communication Development. *The Reporter* 12(3), 11-14.