

When words combine

In the seventh article in our series on communication from birth to three, we explore the role adults play in helping children move from using single words to combining them into two-word phrases.



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THIS IS a tale of two cousins. Tom and Hannah are both 22-month-old, and their mothers are sisters. Both children attend day nurseries and, because the families see a great deal of each other, the children play together regularly. A big topic of conversation between the parents is how different the children are in terms of behaviour and personality, particularly, how their communication is progressing.

Hannah has a vocabulary of about 50 words and has begun to use two-word phrases that are relatively easy to understand. Tom, on the other hand, uses 10 single words that only make sense to his parents. Tom's father is worried, because he cannot see any reason why his son should be 'behind' in his speech and language development. So, Dad has decided that he will take action to help Tom to become a better talker, though he is not quite sure what approach to take. Before we move on with our story, let us take a close look at how the children are developing.

Hannah

Hannah has mastered walking and is very keen to explore objects with her hands. She enjoys sharing books and watching television with her parents, and has begun to take an interest in making marks on paper with her ever-growing collection of felt pens.

She is fascinated by water; her favourite activity is filling up containers and emptying them again—she does with a set of stacking beakers, in the sink and in the bath. She loves being outside in the garden, filling up her little metal bucket with rainwater. Such is her concentration when filling and emptying her bucket, Hannah seems almost to drift into a trancelike state. You could try talking to her, but she becomes so absorbed in what she is doing that she is oblivious to what you might be saying.

Once she has had her fill of experimenting with her bucket, she will look up, acknowledge that you are there and start making comments like, 'water gone and bucket off' (my bucket has fallen over), and will ask questions, such as, 'more water?'

Tom

Tom is working on climbing on, and jumping off, both the sofa and his bed, and is perfecting the art of running as fast as he can for 10 metres without falling over. He spends a great deal of time thinking about transport—trains, in particular. Tom's parents

describe him as 'active and lively, but fixated on his wooden train set'. Sometimes, you can see him lying on his side on the floor, with his nose pressed about two centimetres away from the track, as he makes the train go round and round.

However, unlike Hannah and her bucket and water, Tom is very keen for adults to join in his play with his train set. He becomes very excited when they help him put the track together and talk to him about how the train is going into the tunnel and over the bridge, and laughs loudly when the trains crash. Two of his main words are 'dah!' (bang!) and 'den' (again). Tom's grandma is of the opinion that 'all boys are lazy and that Tom will talk when he is ready'.

There is an entirely different interpretation for what Tom is doing. Far from being 'lazy', Tom is focusing on his physical development and enjoys being active. His interest in trains can be explained by his environment. The family live near a train station and Tom's parents bought him a train set because they saw that he was interested in trains.

His first recognisable spoken word was 'de' (train), which he said when he was 15-months-old. He continues to use it whenever he sees a train, hears one in the distance or when he wants his mum or dad to help him put his train track together. He has a favourite book, which has one colour photograph of an everyday object on each page. Quite predictably, Tom's favourite page is the one featuring the toy train.

Language, cognitive development and adult support

If we take a step back from Tom's communication and look closely at his cognitive development—his thinking and growing understanding of the world—we can see that he has all the building blocks in place to be just as good a talker as his cousin. He knows that:

- Small objects, for example, his toy train, can be used to represent, or symbolise, something that is real.
- Pictures can also symbolise real objects.
- Words can symbolise objects and pictures.
- Every object has a name, and that name can be learned and spoken.

While both children have this understanding, which they gained automatically around the time they

reached 12-months-old, Hannah and Tom have moved forwards in different ways. Hannah uses her knowledge to explore language through social interaction. For example, she went through a phase of pointing at something, saying 'deh!' to mean 'what's that?', and then imitating what her parents said to her.

Hannah and her parents found this, emotionally, very rewarding and became involved easily and naturally in the many thousands of interactions that children need at this stage. Soon, Hannah began using sets of speech sounds, consistently in the same order, to represent different objects and people. These were her first words. At first, most of her words began with a 'd' sound – so that 'banana' would be 'duhdah' and, blanket, 'dahdeh'.

One day, at around 18-months-old, Hannah reached an important milestone in her language development. She had gradually been increasing her spoken vocabulary to include between 50 and 75 words that she could understand and use consistently, including the word 'den', to mean 'do it again'. Suddenly, the word 'den' came to have three new meanings – 'another one', 'the same', and 'more'.

So, when she saw one of her shoes she would ask her mum, 'den tue?' ('Where's my other shoe?'), or comment, 'den nana' ('there's another banana'), and 'den ut' ('pick me up again'). This use of den, to represent all of these meanings, coincided with, and happened because of, a new fixation of Hannah's – to find objects that look the same.

Hannah's parents were thrilled with this new development and used every opportunity to point out objects that were the same, both at home, and when they were out walking – for example: 'Look Hannah. There's a bird. Oh! There's another one. It looks the same.' This is a clear example of the way a child's spontaneous cognitive development, combined with adult support, leads to rapid language development.

Schemas and language

Both of the children's repetitive play shows us that they are working hard to make sense of the world and are able to concentrate deeply on activities that are important to them. These patterns of repetitive behaviour, or schemas, are far from random, and serve an important purpose in young children's learning. Tom is focused on pushing his train round and round the track, and lining up his cars, while Hannah is almost 'driven' to pour, fill and empty.

Involvement in these repetitive behaviours allows toddlers to develop important skills, such as hand-eye coordination, as well as gaining pleasure from deep concentration. Children's repetitive play – for example, throwing objects, spinning them, putting them in and taking them out of containers – offers great advantages for language development.

During the single-word stage, children need to hear the same words and phrases many times, so



Repeated, excited and meaningful activities helped Tom develop his vocabulary

that they can imitate adults talking to them during activities that make sense, until the children begin to use the words themselves. When adults join in with the children's schema play, and comment on the children's actions, by using phrases, such as 'round and round', 'again', 'another one', 'more', and 'oh dear', these phrases eventually become part of the children's vocabulary, which they can use to combine words.

Once children are combining words into two and three-word phrases, their language usually develops spontaneously and very rapidly.

What Tom's Dad decided to do

Tom was at the same level of cognitive development as his cousin, but had yet to make full use of his knowledge. What Tom needed was involvement in some exciting and meaningful repeated activities with an adult who had time to interact with him.

Mum went on maternity leave at this time, but Dad was between jobs and so had plenty of time to spend with his son. The parents decided to reduce



Adults can use repeated phrases during schema play to help children combine words

Tom's time in day nursery to mornings only, with dad now responsible for picking Tom up from nursery and bringing him home.

Dad decided to take Tom out every afternoon for a walk to the park. On the way to the park they passed a house with a dog in the front garden and then they walked over the bridge across the canal, where they could see trains heading in and out of the station. Finally, they reached the park, where Tom played happily on the swings. This allowed dad to use highly repetitive language as he pushed Tom hundreds of times – such as 'hold tight', 'big push', 'ready steady go', 'up high', 'again', as well as 'one more', 'no more', 'finished now'.

Key points

- Children will move from using one word to combining words into phrases at different times, and much will depend on the encouragement and support they get from adults using repetitive phrases to comment on what they are doing
- When parents are able to involve their children in chat as they go about their daily routine tasks, children are getting all the stimulation they need to move them forward, toward developing language naturally and spontaneously

Tom's reaction

Tom did not sit in his buggy during his trips to the park and back home again. If Tom became tired, dad would pick him up, which was great for Tom, because it meant father and son were at the same eye level, and were able to have conversations about what they both saw. Tom began to point at cars, the dog in the garden and buses, and developed an interest in chasing pigeons.

The highlight of the walk back from the park was when Tom stood on the bridge over the canal, waiting for a train to go by on the track about 400 metres away. He became completely still as he listened for the trains to approach. Once the train came into view he would squeal with excitement and shout, 'Den! Den!' After eight walks like these he suddenly began to use the word 'don' (gone), which allowed dad to respond: 'Yes, the train's gone. Shall we wait for another one?'

Gradually, Tom's vocabulary began to increase, and he started to take an interest in books and children's television programmes. BBC TV's *Something Special*, with its emphasis on using repetitive language and MAKATON signing, became a firm favourite. Tom's parents, and the staff at his nursery, found that he was now more interested in singing action songs, with *Wind the Bobbin Up* and *The Wheels on the Bus*, becoming firm favourites.

After about a month of walks, Tom spontaneously said: 'No den' (no train), after a train went by as he stood on the bridge. Tom was moving from the single-word phase to combining words to make two-word phrases.

Implications for practitioners

The combination of Tom's attendance at nursery and increased interaction with his parents started his move towards his rapid vocabulary development. Tom needed to focus on his physical development and benefited from an additional boost in interaction to kick start his move towards building his vocabulary.

All toddlers benefit from strong routine and regular opportunities to play outdoors, where they can indulge their intense desire for physical activity and exploration of the world through being involved in activities that harness their involvement in repetitive activities.

If adults are able to become involved in the play, using simple, repetitive, phrases to comment on what children are doing, they are providing the vital input that children need at this stage. When parents are able to involve their children in chat as they go about their daily routine tasks, children are getting all the stimulation they need to move them forward, toward developing language naturally and spontaneously. **eye**

Useful resources

- For detailed information about schemas, read: *Threads of Thinking: Schemas and young children's learning* by Cathy Nutbrown. SAGE Publications (ISBN: 9781849204644).