

Language & Learning

Building Conversations

Keep It Short and Simple

Having a conversation with a baby is different than having a conversation with an adult or an older child. When we talk with any young child, we make our face and our voice expressive, we try to say interesting things, and we use short, simple phrases and sentences. We repeat a lot, because we know that young children are not just trying to understand what we tell them, they are also trying to learn about the language we are using. Babies who are deaf and hard of hearing are trying to accomplish those same jobs. Because they have to be paying close attention to get a message, they need many, many opportunities. Because the job of acquiring language is complicated, our messages need to be short and simple.

You have practiced responding to signals, commenting on your child's interests, following your baby's lead, and guiding conversations into new and exciting worlds. Every time you use one of these skills, you will also need to practice keeping your conversational turn short and simple.

Adults talk to babies differently than anyone else. They use short, animated phrases and a lot of repetition. These changes serve an important purpose. The "sing song" that we use with babies has been called "motherese" or "parentese." It actually helps little ones figure out the complicated language they hear around them. So go right ahead and make your voice interesting (with lots of pitch variation) and keep your phrases short.


Here are some examples of parent conversation turns that are just right, or just a little bit too much:

Short and simple:	Maybe too much for right now:
Big bite!	You ate a big bite and your mouth is full!
Time to go night-night.	Brush your teeth and then go to bed.
That's my sock.	This is mommy's sock and this is your sock.
Mmmmm, good cereal.	That cereal tastes really yummy.

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Exercise:

Here are some phrases parents might use with their babies. All of them are about ideas that might interest a baby and/or relate to the baby's current interest. Some of them are a little too long. Which ones do you think are short and simple?

<p>Your baby holds up an empty cup.</p> <p>A. "Do you want more milk or are you done?"</p> <p>Or</p> <p>B. (look in cup) "All gone." (hold up milk) "Want more milk?"</p> <p>Feedback: The two phrases in (B) are each short and supported by an action. Your baby has a chance to catch the meaning and the language.</p>	
<p>Your baby fusses and pushes a toy away.</p> <p>A. "No more toy? Ok. Now what?"</p> <p>Or</p> <p>B. "You don't want this toy anymore. Let's find something else for you to look at."</p> <p>Feedback: The phrases in B express good ideas, but they are rather long for a young child with hearing loss. Shorter phrases, like in A, affirm the baby's idea and invite the baby to play something new.</p>	