



GUIDANCE FOR CHILDMINDERS

Supporting Language Development

The first three years of a child's life are crucially important for their development, particularly their language development. Children's language does not just develop on its own though. Babies and very young children need adults to encourage and support the development of their language and communication skills.

As a childminder, it is important that you reflect on how your daily routines can be developed to help promote the speech, language and communication skills of the children in your care. The more stimulation babies and young children get, with you talking and reading with them, and listening and responding to their babbles, gestures and words, the better their language and literacy will be.

This resource offers guidance on how you can ensure that children have the rich language experiences that they need in their earliest years.

Language Development

The majority of brain development occurs in the first three years of a child's life with the most significant growth related to language development reaching its peak in the first year. From birth, there is a narrow window of opportunity to capitalise on this rapid brain development and to provide the support for their speech, language and communication that very young children need.

Brain development is influenced by the home learning environment and by the kinds of experiences the child has at home and, by extension, in their childminder's home. It is really important that you collaborate with families about children's language learning.



Every educational skill requires the use of language so it is the foundation for lifelong wellbeing, learning and development. There can be long-term consequences of poor early language development on children's educational attainment and life chances. Children with speech, language and communication needs are at high risk of difficulties with reading, writing and spelling.

Being able to listen, pay attention, understand others, speak clearly, express ideas and communicate with others are fundamental building blocks for a child's communication development. These building blocks of speech and language are strongly based in children's play and in the interactions children have with their parents and other main carers.

Think about a Child's Age and Stage of Development

The most significant thing you can do to support a child's language development is to communicate with them, talking and listening as you go about your day together.

Children who are in the early stage of their language development need to be able to differentiate between the sounds that make up language and the other sounds around them. Think about background noise such as radio or TV as it can be distracting and can cause the sounds of words children are learning to be heard less clearly.

Very young children are not able to listen to what you are telling them while they are doing something. You need to say their name to get their attention before telling them something or asking them to do something.

Reading with Children

Reading stories with children is one of the best ways to support their language development and enrich their imaginations. It also helps children to develop a foundation for literacy, including a love for books and the motivation to learn to read.

- Books introduce children to the exciting world of stories and help them learn how to express their own thoughts, ideas and emotions.

- Babies love the sound of their carers' voices. Reading with them can be calming during times of distress or unease.
- While reading aloud with children develops their communication skills, characters, words and sounds from books can be talked about at any time, not just reading time.
- Children need to hear a new word several times before it becomes familiar to them. You can support this by using words you have read together in real life experiences. For example, you can provide opportunities for children to physically experience 'over', 'under' and 'through'.



Use Questions with Care

Young children can understand questions and are able to point to the right thing in answer before they can give a response verbally. They have to learn what question words mean before they can answer a question.

Asking questions to which you know the answer – 'what colour is the car?' – or questions that have simple 'yes' or 'no' answers does not support a young child's language development and can actually put pressure on them.

Children usually respond better to comments on what they are doing, for example, 'You have used some dark green paint in your picture'. This will encourage them to talk and will keep their attention on what they are doing.

When you are asking questions, ask those that will get a child thinking and are based on the things that interest them. Open-ended questions that begin with 'what', 'how', 'why' and those that begin with 'I wonder...' and 'tell me about...' have many possible answers and can lead to interesting conversations with children who are old enough to understand the questions.

What would happen if we put the truck in here?

What did you like best about baking the cake?

Who was at grandad's house?

Where would you like to put the teddies?

When did you see the rainbow?

Why do you think that happened?

How will you do that?

Tell me about the trip to the park.



Over time, children become better able to think about what they did, said or made, and to make decisions about what they might do next time.

When asking a question or looking for a response from a child, wait for a few seconds before speaking again yourself. This gives the child time to think and come up with their response.



Create a Language Rich Environment

The learning environment should be adaptable to suit children's learning needs and level of understanding.

- If the room is too noisy, it can be difficult for children to listen or to hear clearly. Add a rug and some cushions to a hard floor to reduce noise.
- Talk about everyday tasks you are doing or things the child is doing as they are doing them, like a running commentary. This allows the child to hear vocabulary and language in real situations.
- Use personal care times to chat with babies and young children, for example, 'This is a warm facecloth for your face.'
- Use your knowledge of the baby or young child and sensitive observation to interpret their wants, needs, interests and feelings, and reflect these back to them using simple language. For example, 'You have put your head on the cushion, you're tired', 'You're smiling, you think that is funny.'
- Young children learn through their senses. Use all of their senses to help them learn new words.
 - Name things you see and hear when you are out and about or in the garden such as plants, animals, insects, birds, rainbows, clouds, streams.
 - Talk about the smells of flowers and plants.
 - Describe the tastes and flavours of various foods.
 - Include different textures in the environment with natural materials like wood, stone, grass, sand, water and clay. Have slimy, slippery, squishy, fluffy and furry things that will get you and the child talking about what they are touching and feeling. Even young babies will verbalise their responses to different textures.
- Invite children to talk about their play and activities. They might be making constructions, drawing, putting dressing-up outfits together, painting, doing puzzles or practising their writing.
- Reread favourite books for as long as children enjoy them. Children like becoming familiar with the language and repeating stories long before they can read.
- Show children how spoken words and writing are linked. You can do this by asking them what they would like you to write on their drawings and reading it back to them.

- Model the use of writing in different situations such as involving children in writing your shopping list. When you write in front of children and talk to them about it, they learn that writing helps us to carry information and to remember things.
- Involve children when writing an email or a note as this will show them some of the ways messages can be given from one person to another. Later, they will see that what was written has the same meaning when it is read by someone else.

Support Children to Learn How to Use Words

- Model and extend language by expanding upon something that the child says or does. When they say a single word like 'drink', you might say, 'You want a drink.' If they point to their cup on the shelf, you might ask, 'You are pointing to your cup, would you like a drink?'
- Provide words and phrases to help children develop a language they can use when talking about what they did, said, made, felt and learned.
- Model the correct pronunciations rather than correcting the child's attempt at pronunciation.
- Listen to what a child says and then repeat it back to them. When they make a mistake in a word or sentence, just say the correct version rather than pointing out the mistake. For example, if the child says, 'I goed to Granny's house', you might say 'You went to your Granny's house.'

- Try not to rush in when a child hesitates. Remember to pause and wait, giving them time to respond.
- If a child finds it hard to remember a word, prompt them with the first sound of the word to jog their memory. This allows them to complete the word themselves and gives them a sense of achievement.
- Give a child two choices, which you model to them, 'Would you like an apple or a banana?' In this way, the child does not have to think of the word as well as say it.
- We often point, pull faces or gesture to enhance or emphasise what we say. While this usually comes naturally, it's good to remember that body language helps convey meaning to very young children.

Play Games with Words

Songs and rhymes are especially good for children as the rhythms and repetitive language make it easier to learn language skills. Sing songs, say rhymes and use spontaneous opportunities to play with words. Children like the sounds of words that rhyme, tongue twisters, alliteration or silly sentences, even if they don't understand every word.

Repetitive, predictable games like 'Pat-a-cake' and 'This little piggy' are important because they have a specific way of being played, they have few actions and words, each element is predictable and there are cues that tell children to turn take. Learning to take turns is an important part of learning to communicate.



Adjust Your Language to Suit the Child

- Use simple words and short phrases or sentences at the child's level to ensure that they understand you.
- Talk at a slower pace and have some pauses.
- Allow time for a child to think and respond.
- Use the same words and phrases for repeated everyday activities.
- Ask few questions and when you do, try to make them 'open' questions.
- Be as specific as possible in the language you use with children.
- Use clear, short instructions when necessary.
- Repeat the same ideas in different ways.



Further Information

Useful books

Early Childhood Ireland. (2012). *Play speak read: Language and literacy through play*. Dublin: Early Childhood Ireland.

French, G. (2013). *Early speech and language matters enriching the communication environment and language development in early childhood*. Dublin: Barnardos.

Hayes, C. (2016). *Language, literacy and communication in the early years. A critical foundation*. Critical Publishing.

Lee, A. (2014). *How to be an Outstanding Childminder*. Bloomsbury Education.

Useful weblinks

[Aistear Siolta Practice Guide](#)

[Tusla Quality and Regulatory Framework](#)

For parents

[First 5 Resources for Parents](#)

[Learning Together: A Parent's Guide to Early Childhood Learning](#)



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