

Activities to Teach Verbal Imitation



Level One: Actions with Objects

**By teaching motor imitation in this way, you may be helping a child learn to really “play” with toys for the first time. Play is important for all children in order to help them master important cognitive skills to establish a foundation for language. This level focuses on joint attention.*

Items/Activities

- Blocks, Cars/Trucks/Trains, Musical Instruments (drums, play piano, horns), Dolls with Accessories (bottle, clothes, play food), Balls, Nesting Cups, Books
 - Model how to play with each of these items. (stack blocks, roll balls, blow horns, feed baby, open/close books)

Guidelines for play at this level

- Focus on simple actions with repetition. Children love repetition and prediction of actions. This will keep them engaged (joint attention).
- Start with familiar or simple actions then build from there.
- Play with toys they enjoy.
- Keep language simple (1-2 word phrases).
- If child is not imitating or engaging, try imitating their behaviors first to attempt to get them engaged.
- Be animated by doing big movements with expression.
- If not engaging, troubleshoot. Why?? Are they calm, content, and comfortable? Consider their sensory needs to be sure they are calm and ready for engagement.

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Level Two: Communicative Gestures

**If a child isn't doing level one (imitating actions with objects) they are not ready for level two. Level one is a prerequisite for level two.*

Items/Activities

- No items are needed for his level. Just your body!
- Clapping, banging hands on a table, banging two blocks together, dancing, give me five, knocking on a door, marching, kicking a ball

Guidelines for play at this level!

- Begin with simple body actions or movements in play that aren't necessarily communicative, but that the child can imitate.
- Move on to easy gestures in context during play and daily routines (ex: waving)
- Move to more complex gestures/patterns.
- Model 3-5 times then help the child perform the gesture (by hand over hand help)
- Use big gestures and heightened affect to attract and keep child's attention.
- Can move to basic signs (starting with request signs like "more, eat, all done, please, go, open, help, mine) only after imitating simple gestures like waving, clapping, blowing kisses.

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Level 3: Nonverbal Actions With Your Face and Mouth

**This purpose of this level is to increase awareness that they are in control of their jaw, lips, and tongue. For some kids this comes naturally, for some they need some strategies to provide oral information/input to increase awareness.*

Items/Activities

- Exaggerated facial expressions: surprise, sad, happy, scared
- More refined movements of mouth: smiling, puckering, lip smacking
- Use horns, whistles, kazoos, musical instruments, pinwheels. Or common household items like funnels, tubes, or cotton balls to blow. (Goal is imitation and turn taking)

Guidelines for play at this level

- Blowing doesn't necessarily matter if they are already talking. It can help increase awareness of speech mechanism. So keep in mind, they don't have to be able to blow a horn to talk.
- There is some controversy on whether doing oral motor tasks is directly linked to speech improvement; however, no controversy in terms of whether it improves oral awareness which is the goal here.
- These activities can help satisfy the oral seeking cravings for kids who are often mouthing toys and objects.

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Level 4 and 5: Vocalizations in Play and Exclamation Words

Prerequisites for levels 4 and 5

- Whining when upset rather than a reflexive cry
- Scream or squeal
- Purposeful laughter
- Purposeful vocalizations with emotion “Da”! or even a grunt.

Level 4 (Vocalizations) Items/Activities

- Vocalizations during gross motor movement activities like swinging, jumping, running.
- Gym activities like a trampoline or ball pit
- Larger spaces that echo
- Group games are very effective at this stage. EVERYBODY talks, sings, or vocalizes.
- Toys that amplify sound – microphone, funnel, paper towel roll, bucket

Guidelines for play at this level

- Engage in play using silly sounds for the child to imitate.
 - Squeal or scream, fake cough, fake sneeze, fake cry, whine, raspberries, slurping a drink, exhalation like “ahhhh” after a drink, mmm when eating, mmm—ahhh for blowing kisses, panting like a puppy, car noises (sirens, brakes squealing, horn).

Level 5 (Exclamations) Items/Activities

- Words that are usually spoken with forcefulness and represent an onset of emotion that can be either positive or negative. Exclamation words are words that we yell to exclaim a message.
- Words like: uh-oh, wow, woa, whee, yay, ooo, yum, ouch, owe

Guidelines for play at this level

- When engaging in play and trying to elicit these exclamation words, use a lot of excitement and intensity to drive the emotion behind the words.
- These exclamation words can be counted as a true “vocabulary word”. (oh no, uh oh, wow)
- Use these words to play with different intonation and loudness levels to experience variety of their voices.
- These words are at a level that is easy to explore new single sounds and sound combinations. So vary the sound combinations you use and practice lots of CV (consonant/vowel) and VC (vowel/consonant) words to begin building more functional word vocabulary. (on, up, mo (more), ah da (all done), go, me).

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Level 6: Automatic Speech in Verbal Routines

**Verbal routines can be completely original or well-established nursery rhymes, games, or songs. These words seem to become “automatic” meaning that a child says the word when very familiar and specific conditions occur.*

Items/Activities

- Use previous preferred activities:
 - Social games: peek a boo, pat a cake, give me 5, row row your boat, etc.
 - Nursery rhymes
- Establish verbal routines during play by setting up the play routine using scripts.
 - Ready, set, go (rolling a ball or car back and forth)
 - 1,2,3
 - Up,Up,Up (while lifting the child up or while climbing a play figure up the steps or ontop of blocks)
 - Down, Down, Down (when getting the child down from your arms or a chair, or stepping or sliding a play figure down a slide or stepping off a block)
 - Hide and seek – verbal routine: “where are you” “there you are”
 - Blowing bubbles: open, pop pop pop, all gone, more, then back to open
 - Knock, Knock, Knock , Open – on doors
 - Night Night – putting baby or stuffed animal to sleep

Guidelines for play at this level

- TIME! Allow the child time to hear routine, recognize it, remember it, and predict it.
- Be sure child is verbal enough to be able to imitate the script.
- Cloze Method – Leave the phrase open for them to finish/open ended.
- Expectant waiting – wait with a purpose. Look at them with an expecting look on your face and provide a period of silence.

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Level 7: Functional Words

**Move to words when a child has achieved a fairly high level of mastery with the easier, earlier levels.*

Prerequisites for Single Word Level

- Interaction is not a problem
 - Social skills are sufficient
 - Attention is pretty good
 - Engagement is present
- Cognition is moving along
 - Watch play skills to assess this. Play skills will progress as their cognition progresses.
 - Make sure they have mastered basic cognitive milestones such as object permanence, cause/effect, and simple problem solving.
 - Play is such that he can watch you play with a new toy and imitate that play.
- Receptive Language is progressing
 - Child is more consistently following directions related to familiar routines and during fun activities
- Imitation is present
 - Child imitates actions, gestures, and other kinds of vocalizations
 - Child can see and do

Items/Activities

- First words selection
 - Choose words that are fairly easy to say (single syllables and simple sound combinations)
 - Choose words with sounds and patterns the child already uses:
 - Sounds in the same sound class: /p,b,m/ /t,d,n/ /k,g/
 - Syllable shapes – CV (consonant/vowel), VC, CVCV (mama, dada)
- Materials
 - Use engaging and open ended toys that allow for creativity and flexibility during play.
 - Blocks, nesting cups, puzzles, bubbles, balls, trucks/cars, books
 - **No flashcards, apps, or electronic toys (or toys with buttons)**

- Avoid academic words as first words: (colors, shapes, numbers and letters) We want to teach functional communication first. Teach those after 50 words
- Teach requests – they need communicative intent (need to know that there is a need to talk)

Guidelines for play at this level

- Use motivating materials.
- Find a balance of fun and demanding
- Do everything you can to achieve early success. Reward all attempts.

*References

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