
Choices are important

When a child learns to speak, it will happen gradually. We likely won't know when the first word will appear, in what context, or even what will be that word. That will be a surprise. After the child starts to realize the power of the spoken words, the language will develop faster. But as parents, we tend to be impatient and wish it was even faster than that.

Words come gradually

When the child has a certain number of words in his vocabulary, we can hope he will be able to access them when needed, but when is that? Even if the child said a specific word once, it does not mean it will be readily accessible the next time he will want to use it. And that is the nature of learning. If you once learned the name of all the planets in the solar system, can you still name them upon request? The more the child will use a word, the faster it will become accessible, but in the mean time, there will be hesitations.

Repeat those words

Hearing a word often will help the child remember that word sooner. Having the opportunity to use the word, will help even more. But we need to keep in mind that the child still needs help to anchor those words in his mind, so the first thing a parent can do is to say those words often, in different contexts. We don't need to ask the child to repeat; as long as he can hear it, in context, it will help.

Why isn't he answering?

Even though repeating a word will help the child, there is no certainty that he will want to use it when we ask. Simple and direct open questions like "What do you want to drink?" is great to prompt an answer from the child (instead of just assuming we know what he wants), but the child might not answer. Why not? Maybe the child doesn't know what he could ask for (milk? water? juice?). The child might have said all those words before but they are still jumbled in his mind. Maybe the child knows what he wants, but can't remember exactly how to pronounce that word. Or maybe the child just drew a blank and can't remember the name of that one drink he wants, because he has not used that word often enough yet.

Give him choices

In order to help the child who might not remember the name or the pronunciation of a word, we can simply offer choices in the question. So instead of asking "What do you want to drink?", we can ask "Do you want milk or juice?" This simple change in the question now allow the child to hear the words (the word he might have forgotten) and the pronunciation (the sounds he was not sure how to say). By helping the child plan his answer, you also help him participate actively in the conversation.

Say it last

Using choices in a question is a great way to help the child and almost encourage him to "repeat", but there is one little trick you might want to consider. If the child still has minimal vocabulary, he might need one little extra bit of help remembering those two choices: if you have a fairly good idea of what the "correct" answer is, put that choice the last one in your question. Why? Because the child will remember best the last thing he heard. So if you know that the child wants milk, ask "Do you want juice or milk?" while if you know that he wants juice, you will ask "Do you want milk or juice?" This strategy might not work all the time, but it will surely help.

Watch your child's vocabulary grow and keep track of it with our [iphone app](#), or a piece of paper. Enjoy those new words he will come up with.