

SPONTANEOUS VOCAL BEHAVIOR AND IMITATION

GOAL

Learn the steps to encourage and shape spontaneous vocal behavior and imitation.

BACKGROUND

Parents of children with limited vocal communication skills worry about what the future holds for their child.

When their child's young, just 2 or 3, parents have hope that their child's speech will come eventually, but as their child gets older they start to wonder if he will speak at all. They are unsure of what they can do.

While we can't predict a child's communication abilities, there are steps we can take to encourage this development.

THE EFFECTS OF SHAPING

Shaping is a procedure commonly used in ABA to reinforce gradual steps toward an end goal. This procedure, especially when used for speech development, takes time and a lot of patience.

Initially, you can encourage vocal play by engaging with your child when he makes speech sounds. Try imitating his sounds and see how he responds.

Keep these points in mind:

- Avoid pressuring your child to make speech sounds
- Stay positive
- Make it fun
- Engage with your child the way he likes

ENCOURAGE VOCAL SOUNDS

This lesson will focus on encouraging the vocal sounds, words and communication your child uses every day. You will learn to shape these sounds into words and gradually teach your child to imitate your words. Vocal imitation opens the door to teaching a wider range of communication skills.

BASIC STEPS TO SHAPE SOUNDS INTO ECHOICS

List Sounds and Reinforcers

Make a list of all the sounds your child is currently making. Make another list of items or interactions that your child enjoys.



Reinforce Any sound

Give your child a reinforcer whenever he makes vocal sounds. This might be a quick interaction like tickling him or he might need something a bit more tangible like a favorite snack or toy.



Shape Sounds Into Words

Shape the sounds he's making into words that include the sounds he's already making by providing reinforcement for sounds that are gradually closer to the words you are helping him create.



Shape Vocal Imitation

Shape those words into vocal imitation by providing reinforcement when he makes the sounds or words you make after you make them.

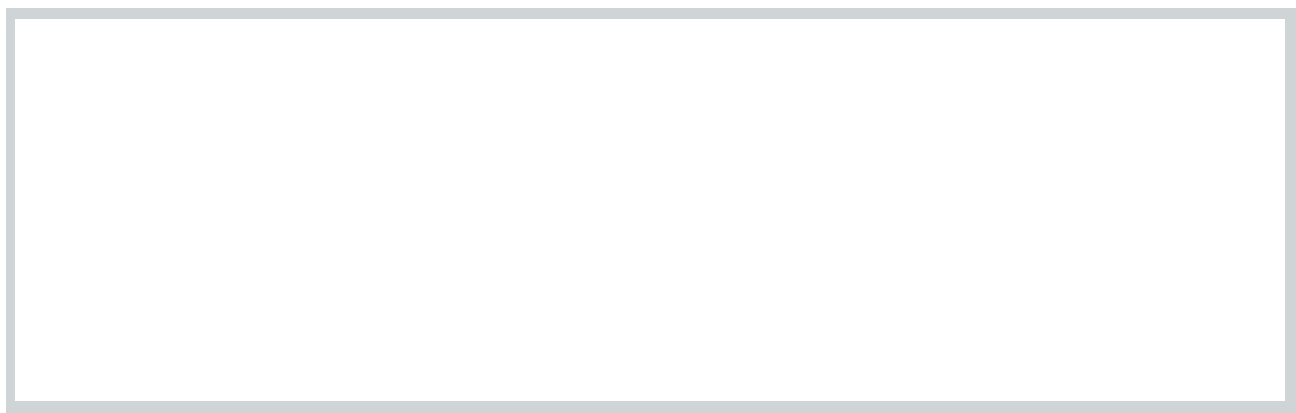
LIST SOUNDS AND REINFORCERS

Make a list of all the sounds your child makes every day

Start to listen carefully to the speech sounds your child is already making. This could be humming, babbling, or even parts of or whole words. On a piece of paper, whiteboard, or your cell phone, make a list of everything you hear. Later this will help you decide which sounds you might be able to shape into words.

While you're at it, make a list of your child's favorite things including foods, toys, items of special interest and interactions. You will use some of these items for reinforcers through the rest of the process. Try to think of things he likes that are quick and easy to deliver and that disappear quickly or you can control easily such as tickles, bubbles, pieces of cereal, fruit, or balloons flying round the room. Even if you can't easily take the item away, add it to the list anyway.

WHAT SOUNDS DOES YOUR CHILD MAKE RIGHT NOW?

A large, empty rectangular box with a light gray border, intended for the user to write down the sounds their child makes.

WHAT ARE YOUR CHILD'S FAVORITE ITEMS, ACTIVITIES AND INTERACTIONS?

A large, empty rectangular box with a light gray border, intended for the user to write down their child's favorite items, activities, and interactions.

REINFORCE ANY SPEECH SOUNDS

MAKE IT PART OF YOUR CHILD'S DAY

Show your child you value the sounds he makes every day.

Now that you have a better idea of what sounds your child makes and items, activities and interactions that might be motivating to him, it's time to just play with your child.

Sit wherever he's most comfortable such as on his bed or on the floor. Keep some of his favorite things you listed in the last step next to you, within easy reach.

If your child prefers not to sit, that's fine too. Put the things he enjoys up on a counter or shelf that's out of his reach, but easy for you to get to.

Engage with your child in any way that he enjoys. If he likes you to follow him around the room, play with toys, read a book, or spin in circles, do those things with him.

Avoid activities that include sounds such as TV or music because you want to be able to focus on the sounds he makes at first.

REINFORCE!

Provide reinforcement when your child emits any speech sound.

Whenever he makes any speech sound, provide reinforcement in a way that he enjoys. Some children enjoy loud, excited praise followed by quick tickles, bubbles or a moment to play with a favorite toy. Other children respond better to a quietly stated "yes! Great!" And a gentle shoulder rub accompanied by one of their reinforcers.

Remember to match your delivery of praise to what your child enjoys. Avoid startling him in your excitement.

Imitate his speech sounds

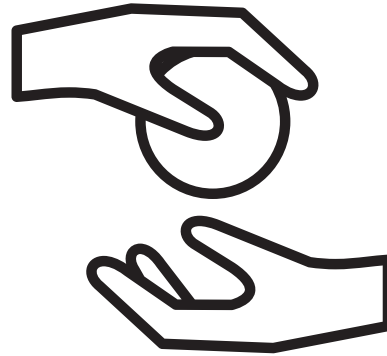
Many children enjoy when you imitate the speech sounds they make. Try this throughout the day to see how he reacts. If he responds negatively by pushing you away or becoming agitated, stop and try again another time. If he has a limited reaction or a positive reaction, continue to do this periodically as though you were having a conversation with him. Provide extra encouragement and reinforcement any time your child makes a new sound. The goal is to gradually expand the different speech sounds and the frequency of those sounds throughout the day.

If your child makes a lot of speech sounds throughout the day, you're ready to start the next step in the process, shaping those sounds into words.

SHAPING SOUNDS INTO WORDS

Shaping is a process of reinforcing smaller steps to your end goal. As your child develops more speech sounds, start reinforcing only those sounds that are closer to words than the previous sounds.

- ✓ mmmm
- ✓ mmmuuhhh
- ✓ mmmuuhhnn
- ✓ mmuhn
- ✓ muhin
- ✓ mufin



In the example above, provide reinforcement initially for the mmmm sound.

Once your child makes the mmmuuhhh sound, stop reinforcing the mmmm sound and wait for him to make a sound that's closer to the word you're trying to shape.

In the example above, it's the mmmuuhhnn sound, but it could also be mmmuuufff depending on what sounds your child finds easier to make. The steps don't need to be as clearly defined as in this example, but what you're looking for is continual, gradual progress toward your end goal. If at any point he says the full word or comes very close, give him extra reinforcement.

Every child develops and progresses at their own rate. Don't get discouraged if this process takes a long time, just continue to provide reinforcement for sounds that are closer and closer to words.

SHAPE WORDS INTO IMITATION

Imitation

Once your child starts making more sounds and maybe some word approximations, use the same process to get your child to imitate or echo your speech sounds.

This is an important skill because it can grow his vocabulary much more quickly once he understands what you want him to do.

Teaching him new communication skills becomes easier and faster once he's able to imitate the sounds and words you make.



Teaching Imitation

What you want is for your child to hear you say a word or sound such as cup and then repeat the exact word or sound you made.

The process is essentially the same as with the other steps.

- First, identify the words or sounds he's already making and the reinforcers you will use.
- Make one of the sounds and wait for him to repeat it.
- If he makes the sound, provide reinforcement.
- If he doesn't make the sound, repeat the sound and wait.

Repeat this process until he makes the sound. If you have tried 3 times and he still hasn't made the sound, don't give him the reinforcer, but move on to a different activity. Avoid putting pressure on him to repeat you.



KEEP TRYING

Remember, each child grows and develops at his own rate. For many children, this process is slow and somewhat tedious. Just keep trying.

If your child struggles with echoing your sounds and words after you have gone through this process for several weeks or even a month, try different reinforcers. Often finding new foods, activities and toys your child is interested in sparks the motivation you need in your child.

If these new reinforcers don't motivate him to imitate your speech sounds and you have been consistent in following this process, switch to teaching him motor imitation and requesting. Children who have difficulty learning to imitate speech sounds may be more successful at it once they develop motor imitation and requesting skills. Once he learns how to imitate your actions and ask for his favorite items, come back and try to teach him to imitate your speech sounds again.