



Connecting With Your Child Through Questions and Comments

At The Hanen Centre, we've always believed that enjoyable, extended interactions between parents and children is the key to successful communication development. Taking turns communicating back-and-forth is the best way for a child to learn. When your child sends you a message (with or without words), it's encouraging when you respond right away. Asking questions can be a great way to respond and encourage your child to take another turn – but it's best if you keep a few things in mind.



Some questions don't help a conversation continue – they turn a child off. So keep in mind which kinds of questions STOP a conversation.

Questions That Stop the Conversation



- Too many questions
- Questions that test your child's knowledge
- Questions that are too hard
- Questions that don't match your child's interests
- Questions that answer themselves (for example, "You like that, don't you?")

One of our favourite strategies is to **follow your child's lead**. This simply means that when your child starts an interaction with you, let him know you've received his message and respond to what he's interested in (not what *you're* interested in). The best interactions usually happen when you follow your child's lead, since he's more likely to communicate about his interests. It doesn't really matter what you say as long as you are enthusiastic and interested, and talk about what's of interest to him.

If you do ask a question when responding, make sure it's a question your child is able and willing to answer. Asking, "Where's your train going?" may get a response because it shows interest in your child's play, but "What colour is your train?" is testing what he knows and may turn him off the interaction.

But sometimes, no matter what questions you ask, your child might not say much in return. And that's okay. Just play with him and make comments, rather than asking questions. For example, saying "Your train has so many people in it," may get him to take a man out or put another man in and look at you and laugh.

If you know what stage of communication your child is at, here are some questions you could ask:

Discoverer	Discoverers can't understand words yet, so the question itself isn't important. Discoverers love the sound of your voice when you ask questions because questions make your voice go up and down, which really engages them. So use any question and exaggerate your intonation, and you'll usually be able to attract a Discoverer's attention.
Communicator	Use concrete questions with Communicators – yes/no questions or questions that let the child make a choice. Using "wh" questions is also an option, but they need to be simple enough that your child can answer them without words. For example, "What's the baby going to eat?" when playing "feed the baby".
First Words User	Yes/no questions, choice questions and "wh" questions are all good options for First Words Users. Try to ask questions with answers that include a word your child can say.
Combiner	Combiners can answer all of the above questions, as well as more abstract questions – questions about people or objects who are not present, or about past or future events are good options.

Asking too many questions can stop the conversation. Try making a comment instead – even if your child doesn't know how to respond to a comment, he's learning a lot by hearing it. If he doesn't respond, turn the comment into a question that he can answer.

References

1. Pepper, J., & Weitzman, E. (2004). *It Takes Two to Talk: A practical guide for parents of children with language delays* (2nd ed.). Toronto: The Hanen Centre.

About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

For more information, please visit www.hanen.org.

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