Leaps in Language: 
Single words to phrases and sentences

First words are an exciting start to language. Children at a one-word stage know much more than they say. Understanding language comes before using it. Expressive skills happen after much receptive language experience. Families can use many strategies to guide and grow children’s communication.

Involve Senses: Talk about the look, feel, smell, taste, and sound of objects. The more words children know, the more words they use. When playing with a ball, you might talk about its color, size, and texture such as bumpy/smooth/squishy.

Narrate Activities: Describe in interesting, specific details what children enjoy doing. Discovering longer phrases for activities keeps children’s learning fun. Avoid asking test questions. When playing with cars, you might talk about action on the toy road. “That noisy car is speeding to go far away.”

Expand Their Words: Respond to children’s utterances with positive, longer statements. Your modeling of phrases or sentences helps children increase their words. When children name an item or request an action, provide more language. If they say “kitty”, you can say “It’s a tiny, baby striped cat.”

Pause Purposefully: Interact at a pace that gives children time to communicate. Pause for them to think of what to say. Wait briefly before doing what they expect. When they hold up fingers in a messy task, pause for them to say “wash” or “help.” Then model or reply, “You want to wash your hands.”

Use Complete Sentences: Talk naturally so children are aware of using words to form full statements. They learn verbs and nouns first but can gradually use function words (a, the, to, in, and, her) to communicate clearly. When children say, “open door” you can say “I will open the door to go in her room.”

Add Vocabulary: Provide a variety of words for what children say. When they know more words, children begin to combine phrases and create sentences. Consider including synonyms in your chats. When they say “coat” you might use an unfamiliar word to reply. “You want to wear your _____” (sweater, jacket, windbreaker, slicker).

Include Information: Extend your conversations so there is more to think about and discuss. Adding more complex language keeps children engaged and stimulates interaction. When they say “Sad”, you could add more. “Yes, the baby is more upset than the brother.” Or offer another idea. “Maybe the baby is sad because he did not want to leave now.”

Enjoy Repetition: Include a new word multiple times within a story, song or activity. The repetition of new words and fun actions adds to children’s discovery of language. You can repeat words in enjoyable experiences for them to learn and remember. “The squirrel went down the tree. You went down the slide. Let the doll go down the stairs. Down she goes.”

Read and Recite: Increase steadily the complexity of language used with children. Create daily opportunities for them to listen to you, and for you to listen to them. Read, recite, sing, talk, play, and wonder out loud. Progressing from the one-word stage to phrases and sentences is a leap made by exploring language together playfully.