

## As more children struggle to speak, here's how to get yours talking

The ability of New Zealand children to hold a conversation is slipping, according to teachers.

Teachers are blaming Covid-19, excessive screen time and limited interaction with books for an increase in five-year-olds struggling to string a four- or five-word sentence together.

That is according to a [new report](#) from the Education Review Office, published on Thursday.

"There is a complete lack of positional language, pronouns, and simple grammar tenses. A 6-year-old might say 'Me go pee' instead of 'I need the toilet'," a new entrant teacher told researchers.



"I have been teaching for 24 years and have never seen this low level of oral language."

But parents need not panic, at least not too much anyway. There are simple strategies that parents can do to up their children's chatter skills, according to Dr Elizabeth Doell, a speech-language and communication lecturer from Massey University.

"If we think about starting early, that would be really good," Doell says, adding that for most kids it is never too late for a parent to start consciously working on their child's language development.

### Turn taking

Even when a baby accidentally smiles and a parent responds with a smile or a kind word, we are practising "turn taking". This strategy can continue with verbal language.

"Right throughout the whole of a child's early life, they need to have responsive partners, conversational partners who are aware of what they like to talk about and who can engage them in things that are interesting," Doell says, adding that this could be a parent or even an older sibling.

Tired, busy parents take heart: it doesn't need to be a long, planned conversation, but small interactions as the day unfolds.

An example could be an adult asking a child what they would like for dinner and the child says "Fish and chips." The adult can respond with something like "I like fish and chips too."

"[That] is just making it into a slightly longer sentence and that's what we call modelling and expanding," Doell says.

### Throw out a complex question

Home language and communication is typically more simple than what a child will encounter at school. It is also often in the here and now, such as "What do you want to eat?"

The questions children encounter at school will likely be more complex and looking into the future, according to Doell.

But there is no reason why a parent can't give their child some practice at home. Often this means posing an open-ended question, Doell says. This might be "what do you want to do in the weekend?" or "what do you want to do in the future?"

"That is quite a big jump from that home language," she says.

This is something that children impacted by Covid-19 lockdowns and closed schools might struggle with, but many will likely catch up, she says.

"Just because they didn't learn it at the time we expected them to learn the language, doesn't mean they can't learn it."

### **Interactive reading**

Being read to might be a passive activity for a child, but parents can turn it into a conversation. Try reading a page or two and asking your child "What is going to happen next?" or "How might that person be feeling?"



"Those nice open questions create a conversation around the story," Doell says.

"It's a strategy that we use a lot with children who are needing some more support with their language"

While excessive TV has been partly blamed by teachers for poor language skills, parents can use TV as a conversation starter just like they would books, Doell says.

### **Is there a health problem?**

It is so simple that parents might overlook it, but a constant stream of snotty noses, ear infections or other hearing issues can impact a child's ability to engage in conversation, Doell says.

This is something a GP can look at.

Children who are neurodivergent, such as those with autism, might also struggle with language.

### **Quality early education**

Studies show that quality early education can accelerate literacy learning by up to a year. This is especially the case for children from poor communities and is one of the reasons that New Zealand heavily subsidises early education from age three.

### **When to seek help**

Parents who are concerned about their child's language and communication can first chat with their child's school or early learning teachers, because you might not have anything to worry about. A GP can also help.

"In those [school] contexts, the children will be using quite different language," Doell says. "The language at home is going to be much more informal and probably not as big a range of vocabulary."

Reference: RNZ

<https://www.rnz.co.nz/news/national/525929/as-more-children-struggle-to-speak-here-s-how-to-get-yours-talking>