

## Overcoming the Language Barrier with Non-English Speaking Young Children

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During the adoption process we were informed by our social worker to expect that our new daughter from China would most likely be a bit delayed. When I was united with her on March 10, 2002, in Guangxi Province, it was clear that this beautiful little 16-month-old was, indeed, more like a 10-month-old. At that time, her developmental information stated that she was able to produce a few Cantonese words such as “mama” and “baba.” Perhaps this was the case back at the orphanage. I am sure that she took one look at my strange blond-haired, blue-eyed face and heard the weird sounds coming out of my mouth and thought, “Who are *you* lady?”

After the initial shock reaction in China, my lovely daughter went into shut-down mode. My quiet, reserved little girl wasn’t doing much communicating except crying out of frustration at our not understanding what she wanted. Having a child development and early childhood education background, I found myself applying information and techniques that I had previously taught or modeled to others. It was a challenging learning experience, to say the least. The following specific guidelines are offered as points for understanding how to set up experiences and activities that are rich in language and communication.

- Language emerges from natural conversations between a child and his/her caregiver, so take advantage of naturally occurring events in a child’s world. A bug crawling across the windshield while we drive is a nuisance, a traffic light that stays red is aggravating, and McDonald’s golden arches give us heartburn. To a young child, bugs are the most fascinating of creatures, the red of traffic lights remind them of a toy of the same color at home, and those big yellow curvy things in the sky smell great as we pass them.
- Attempts need to be encouraged rather than corrected. Although we may read that adults need to use *proper* words rather than “baby talk,” attempts at a new skill need reinforcement. Correction can come very informally; for example, if a child says, “Buggies fly!” We can respond with, “My goodness, the bug flies! You saw the bug fly!” This approach is more positive than telling the child the word is not “buggy” and giving the correction.
- Expansion is the main technique I used with Jenna when she began to use a few words. Her first actual English word was, “dog.” In watching her face, seeing what she was looking at and what the dog was doing, I was able to expand upon her one word. I replied, “Yes, Jenna. The dog is outside barking. I wonder what he is barking at. Funny dog!” After that we focused quite a bit of time on the dog and went to discover what he had heard or seen. It turned into a full discussion (me doing all the talking at first). After that, Jenna used the word “dog” extensively, and quickly she began to use two-word phrases.
- Silence does not necessarily mean that communication is not taking place. Silence often means someone is thinking, processing, or daydreaming. Unless it is a dangerous situation, learn to wait a few seconds more than is typically comfortable for you before responding. Chances are the child may be able to actually complete the response without any assistance.

- Sometimes the rate you speak or number of thoughts may need to be decreased. A good rule of thumb is to communicate one sentence at a time based on age. A child that is two can most likely only process two statements at one time. This includes directions and commands such as “Go take off your shoes and put them in the closet.” A two year old will attend to those statements, that is, unless he or she hears one or two more!
- Action- and play-oriented activities that involve the senses (taste, touch, smell, hearing, vision) stimulate communication to a greater degree than activities that just involve watching or listening. While reading books together is a marvelous activity, how enriched stories would be if they were acted out or connected with a cooking or singing.
- While working in the kitchen, changing a diaper, driving, or taking a shower, etc., put words to your actions and tell the child what you are doing. Children learn to connect words with actions and objects just by watching and hearing adults during daily routines.

Of all the language and communication strategies we used with Jenna, I have to say that a sense of humor goes a long way. It helps keep us sane and lets children be able to see us as real people. I will always remember one noteworthy experience where a sense of humor helped me have a better perspective. Every night before she went to sleep, Jenna would lie in my arms as I rocked her in the rocking chair. Every time I would bend down and whisper in her ear, “I have a secret to tell you... I love you... I will always love you.” I did this faithfully and also hoped that one day, she would have the feelings, desires, and words to say those wonderful words to me. One night, lo and behold, Jenna pulled my head down as I rocked her to sleep. She said to me that she had a “secret.” My heart went straight into my soul and I was elated. Jenna finally wanted and could communicate her love for me. As I was bending down, I heard these sweet words, “dog poop.” After recovering from my disappointment, realizing that we had a related incident that day, I thought to myself, “Well, at least she used a two-word phrase!”

Jenna Grace Nian Xing is now 3 ½ and never seems to NOT be talking. Incidentally, she finally did say she loved me during a totally unexpected moment when she was 19 months old. I was reading her a book. That moment will forever stay in my mind as she said to me, “I love you, Mommy.”