

Some Basic Sentence-building Principles
for Talking to Children

Developed by

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1. Vocabulary

- Use words that are short (1-2 syllables) and common.
Ex: "house" instead of "residence"
- Translate difficult words into easy phrases.
Ex: "what happened to you" instead of "what you experienced"
- Use proper names and places instead of pronouns.
Ex: "what did Marcy" do? instead of "what did she do?"; "in the house" instead of "in there"
- Use concrete, visualizable nouns ("back yard") instead of abstract ones ("area").
- Use verbs that are action-oriented.
Ex: "point to," "tell me about," instead of "describe"
- Substitute simple, short verb forms for multi-word phrases when possible.
Ex: "if you *went*" instead of "if you *were to have gone*"
- Use active voice for verbs instead of the passive.
Ex: "Did you see a doctor?" instead of "Were you seen by a doctor?"
[Note: One exception: the passive "get" ("Did you get hurt?"), which children acquire very early, and is easier to process than "Were you hurt?"]

2. Putting the words together

- Aim for one main idea per question/sentence.
- When combining ideas, introduce no more than one new idea at a time.
- Avoid interrupting an idea with a descriptive phrase. Put the phrase (known as a relative clause) at the end of the idea instead.
Ex: "Please tell me about the man who had the red hat on." instead of "The man who had the red hat on is the one I'd like you to tell me about."
- Avoid difficult-to-process connectives like "while" and "during."
- Avoid negatives whenever possible.
- Avoid questions that give a child only 2 choices. Add an open-end choice at the end.
Ex: "Was the hat red, or blue, or some other color?"

BOTTOM LINE: SHORT AND SIMPLE IS GOOD.