

## Looking for Learning / Learning to Look: Getting and Keeping Children's Attention

Carolyn Ostrander, New York

*A How to Teach Cued Speech Share-Fair Presentation*

I have a handout (Language Development, by Ostrander) that I use with parents to talk about language development at their level. It essentially focuses on two main ideas:

- First, there are many different levels of language involved in learning. It's not all about speech, or grammar, or even vocabulary. One of the parts of language that isn't talked about much is "pragmatics" or the purposes we use language for: asking for something, sharing time with someone, expressing a feeling – these are all reasons children *want* to communicate, and they should be helped to succeed whenever possible.
- Second, I focus on the importance of sharing communication with the child. Parents and other family members play a critical role in providing lots and lots of examples of language for children to learn from. If you use the handout, give me lots of credit!

The theme I use when talking to parents is that **getting and keeping a child's attention is not rocket science**. There's nothing really mysterious about it. It's mostly a matter of being helpful and stubborn enough to make it happen and believing that it will.

1. In my opinion, **the thing that deaf children need the most is face time**. That is time when you share communication and share the focus, the topic that you're talking about with your child.
2. I tell parents to believe that your child can communicate with you — and more than that, **give them as many chances as possible to see that**

**communication is in the air all around.** If you're too busy or too new or too taken up with what you're doing to cue something, then at least stick your hand in the air and hold it up when you're talking so that they get to know that communication is happening, even when they're not looking. If they look up, they should have a chance to know someone is talking.

3. **Use your face.** Be expressive. Share smiles. Share eye contact. Take turns smiling. Take turns playing peek-a-boo. Give them a chance to initiate games and contact. If a baby puts her arms in the air and looks at you, repeat the gesture and make a face that says "Now you!" Take turns making faces. It doesn't all have to be about the cues – but of course, you want to cue too, even if it's just the single cues you're learning. Don't be afraid to babble with your baby – make it a game!
4. **If you have something to say, make your child pay attention. Don't give up.** This is something I learned from watching two teachers of the deaf in Minnesota. In the classroom where a hearing teacher of the deaf was talking and cueing, the teacher cued even if the child wasn't looking. In the classroom where a deaf teacher was "talking" by signing, the deaf teacher would take the child's face in her hand and move it toward her. She would pat the floor. She would wave her foot. She would make sure that the child knew she had something to say. So I say to parents that if you want your children to look because it's an important message, take the time to make them look.
5. This might seem to contradict what I said earlier, but I think both techniques are important. **Put language in the air!** In the signing classroom, a child who happened to look up in another part of the room would see signing happening. AND it's ok and important to get your child's attention for direct communication!
6. **Give your child lots of feedback.** Let them know when they make a gesture, a sound or a cue, that you have caught it and reward them. One of the good ways

to do that is by mimicking what they are doing so that they know what it is they did that you saw. You can expand it by making a word or half a word into a sentence for them.

7. **Put up lots of mirrors** – put a mirror over the sink so that your child can see you talking even if you're doing dishes.
8. **Borrow faces.** If your child is looking at a toy, a ball, or a book, you can cue on the face of the little child in the book. You can cue on the ball. You can cue on your own child's face when they're on your lap and they can see the cues as if it was their hand so that they get to know what the cues are that go with an object.
9. **Make it necessary and important to talk or to cue or to gesture or sign.** Give them choices and make them take them. Do you want the red cup or the blue one? And don't guess what they want. Wait. Make them choose. Ask open-ended questions, and be patient enough to get answers. Reward them for communicating. Praise them for taking chances. And show them it's ok that communication breaks down and needs repair by cueing "huh?" and "again, please!" when you talk to other hearing people as well.
10. **Make silly mistakes and make some of them a little annoying.** Put the shirt on backwards for the child so that they have to protest, they have to do something communicative in order to get the mistake corrected. Make it fun. Don't torture the child, but being silly can be a great tool.
11. **Wait to be asked for some things like snacks or toys.** Make them take the first step to communicate. Also, take turns – let them choose the topic. Let them lead the conversation once in a while. The more, the better.

**Comment:** This isn't a question, but something I would like to add. My daughter-in-law has a one, three, and four year old. What struck me in their language learning

environment is the repetition – over and over and over. Many parents of deaf children ask, “How many times do I have to say something for them to learn it?” With my daughter-in-law, it’s impossible to count. It’s just all the time. Repetition is so important and you just do it. Don’t think how many times.

**Carolyn Ostrander:** Some of the most famous researchers say that children hear the first word they say 10,000 times before they say it. And 10,000 times shouldn’t be too many times to cue a word to get the first word. You have to understand that you would be doing that with your hearing child anyway. You just wouldn’t be counting. It’s only because the cueing is new that it feels like a lot.