

The Communication Ladder

Four weekly goals that build on each other — so progress compounds across the month instead of resetting every Monday.

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Used on Days 3, 5, 11, 19, 24

Speech-language therapy remains a core recommended intervention, and services can start as soon as a delay is noticed, before any formal diagnosis is finalized ^[2]. Alongside that formal support, a child benefits enormously from hundreds of small, low-pressure communication chances built into an ordinary day — this ladder organizes those chances so they escalate gently across four weeks, one rung at a time.



THINK OF IT LIKE A REAL LADDER

You wouldn't ask a child to skip from the bottom rung to the top. Each week here is one rung — solid on its own, and the only thing the next rung needs to be reachable.

The first two rungs

1

Week 1 – Choice-making in 2 daily moments

Pick two fixed moments (breakfast + dressing works well). Offer two real, visible options every time. Accept any communication attempt as a win – pointing, a sound, a sign, or a full sentence. This week is about opportunities, not correctness.

Simply put: you are not testing your child. You are opening a door, twice a day, every day, and noticing whoever walks through it – however they choose to walk through.

2

Week 2 – Expansion, all day

If your child says one word, respond with two: "car" → "big car." Don't demand a repeat – model one step above where they currently are, across as many moments as you can manage.

Simply put: you're not correcting your child, you're showing them what the next size up sounds like – the same way you'd hand a slightly bigger puzzle piece to someone who just finished an easier one.

The final two rungs

3

Week 3 – Descriptive language modeling

Narrate what's happening rather than quizzing ("You're pouring the water," not "what's this?"). This builds vocabulary passively and lowers the pressure of constant testing.

Simply put: talk the way a sports commentator talks – describing the action as it happens, never stopping to ask the player questions.

4

Week 4 – Independent requesting

Create low-pressure reasons to request without being asked – hold a cup just out of reach for a few seconds, pause mid-activity and wait. Encourage the request to come from your child first.

Simply put: you're leaving a small, comfortable gap for your child to step into – not a test, just space that used to be filled in for them.



PICTURES, SIGNS AND AAC ARE NOT A LAST RESORT

Current evidence does not support the common fear that using pictures, signs, or an AAC device will delay spoken language^[7]. Introducing a communication support now typically gives a child a way to be understood today, while speech continues to build alongside it.

5 daily moments, wherever you live

The moment matters more than the menu — here's the same idea, three ways.

BREAKFAST — LAGOS, NIGERIA

"Akara or pap?" — hold up both, or point to each pot, and wait a full five seconds before helping.

BREAKFAST — NAIROBI, KENYA

"Uji or mandazi?" — same five seconds of real waiting, same two visible options.

BREAKFAST — HOUSTON, USA

"Cereal or eggs?" — hold up the box and the pan. The food changes. The moment doesn't.

That's the whole idea behind all five daily moments: the specific food, toy, or activity should be whatever's actually in your home. What matters is the *structure* — two real options, held up together, followed by a real pause.

2. Dressing

"Red shirt or blue shirt?" with both visible. In a household where uniforms are worn, this becomes "socks first or shoes first?" — the choice-making moment travels anywhere.

4. Bubbles or tickles

Pause mid-activity, wait for any response before continuing. Costs nothing, needs no equipment beyond your own hands.

3. Play

Expand one word into two, staying attached to what interests them — a toy car in Ohio, a homemade ball of rolled-up plastic bags in a Lagos compound, both work exactly the same way.

5. Bath time

Narrate actions ("pouring," "splashing") instead of quizzing. Works identically whether bath time means a tub, a bucket, or a shared basin.

Add turn-taking

Research following toddlers with autism found social turn-taking positively linked to joint attention – a foundational social-communication skill – suggesting turn-taking games are worth building in early and often ^[16].



THREE WAYS TO PRACTICE TURN-TAKING TODAY

Rolling a ball back and forth · a simple board game or even stacking cups one at a time · saying "your turn" / "my turn" out loud during any shared activity, so the pattern is named, not just implied.

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Your weekly communication log

One line a week is enough. This is a record, not homework.

WEEK	MOMENT TRIED	WHAT HAPPENED	KEEP DOING?
1			Y / N
2			Y / N
3			Y / N
4			Y / N

If speech is delayed, ask for a hearing evaluation if one hasn't been done — developmental surveillance at every well-child visit exists exactly to catch this early^[2], and a child can't reliably learn language they aren't hearing clearly.

Sources for this guide: [2] CDC — Developmental Monitoring and Screening · [7] AAC systematic review (2021) · [16] Lee & Schertz, turn-taking and joint attention (2022). Full list of 19 references in Document 0 — Start Here.