

Section 7.6 - Understanding and using four-word sentences

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Why is this important?

As language develops, children need to understand increasingly more complex instructions and use longer sentences to describe and explain. This helps expand vocabulary and link words together using 'a' and 'the' as sentences become more like the mature adult form.

A: Naughty toys

What to do?

- Ask the child to find two favourite toys (e.g. Spiderman and Batman, Fifi and Dora).
- Find a toy table and chair (or use a real one if necessary).
- Explain that the toys are being naughty by hiding all over the place. Tell the child where to put them – try to make this as fun and outrageous as you can!
- The child will need to understand four different parts of the sentence to get the instruction correct:
 - Person (Spiderman or Batman)
 - Preposition ('on'/'under')
 - Action ('jump'/'sit'/'stand'/'lie')
 - Place ('table'/'chair')
- Ask the child to:
 - 'Make Fifi sit under the chair.'
 - 'Make Dora lie under the table.'
 - 'Make Batman jump on the table.'
- If a child gets part of the instruction wrong, repeat the instruction emphasising the key words where the correction needs to be made (e.g. if the child places the toy 'on' the table instead of 'under', you would say 'Dora's lying *on* the table. Make Dora lie *under* the table.' If the child doesn't correct the error, move the toy to the right place and then repeat the instruction.
- When the child has put the toy in the right place, ask 'What did you do?' Encourage all four key words to describe the placement of the toy.

Step up

- One at a time, try:
 - A choice of three toys – Fifi, Dora and Barbie.
 - More prepositions – the toys could go 'on', 'under' or 'behind'.
 - Another place – 'table', 'chair' and 'bed'.
- Encourage the child to use extra words (e.g. 'a' or 'the' to increase the length of the sentence).
- Reverse roles so the child is telling *you* where to put the toys.

Step down

- Slow down your rate of sentence delivery – this often helps processing.
- Reduce the choices so the child is only listening for three key words (e.g. use one toy or one place).
- Start with two action words (e.g. 'jump' vs. 'sit') and build up to using four words.

B: Helping Santa (Seasonal activity)

What to do

- Gather together some pairs of 'big' and 'little' objects (e.g. balls, pencils, teddies, books). Around five sets of items should be enough. Put the pairs of items in front of the child.
- Ask the child to find two of his/her favourite toys (e.g. Bob the Builder and Thomas the Tank Engine).
- Have two sacks (or bags) and two stockings (or socks). Give one sack and one stocking to each toy.
- Explain that the child is going to pretend to help Santa by giving out the presents.
- Give an instruction:
 - 'Put the *little book* in *Bob's sack*.'
 - 'Put the *big pencil* in *Thomas's sack*, etc.'
 - 'Put the *big ball* in *Bob's stocking*.'
- If the child finds it difficult, repeat the sentence emphasising the key words and physically prompting if necessary.
- When the toy is correctly placed, ask 'What did you do?' Can the child say the four elements (e.g. '*big ball* (in) *Bob's sack*')?

Step up

- Add a third toy that also has a sack and stocking.
- Encourage the child to use the linking words 'a', 'the' and 'in' (e.g. 'I put *the* big ball *in* Bob's sack').
- Reverse roles so the child tells *you* which toy to put in whose sack/stocking.

Step down

- Take away one of the elements (i.e. start with one size of toy, such as all the big objects *or* one toy) which will reduce the instruction to a three-word level. Then gradually build up to four elements as the child becomes more confident.
- Help understanding by slowing down the rate at which you say the sentence.