

## How to Create a Rich Learning Environment at Home —for Children at All Stages



Infant Chloe with her parents at Clarke (*prior to the COVID-19 pandemic*). Because so much learning happens at home, the Clarke team coaches families how to create language-rich environments in all areas of a child's life.

Throughout childhood, the family is the most influential presence in a child's life. And because so much learning happens at home, the Clarke team coaches families how to create language-rich environments in all areas of a child's life. With Clarke's support, families learn various listening and spoken language (LSL) strategies to support language development through play and age-appropriate activities, and share experiences and questions with other families in Clarke's support groups.

But many families feel unsure of their ability to execute a series of rigid clinical strategies at home—a sentiment often expressed to the Clarke team.

"First things first," responds Sherri Fickenscher, MS, LSLS Cert. AVEd, education support specialist at Clarke, "whether your child has a diagnosed hearing difference or not, you already know how to communicate with them! Take a deep breath and relax... you got this."

Importantly—as Clarke professionals frequently emphasize—families are already equipped with many of these skills. A significant number of LSL strategies are intuitive, mirroring how adults naturally interact with babies and young children. Many families are already using these strategies without even realizing it.

“What do you do when your baby cries?” says Sherri. “You go and pick your baby up! That’s responding to the way they’re communicating their need to you. If we respond to children by engaging in turn-taking, regardless of the level of their hearing loss, then we are already building strong communication partnerships.”

To further support this important work, we’ve compiled a collection of tips and strategies—sorted by developmental stage—which can serve as a resource for families and caregivers eager to establish (or enhance) their learning environment at home. **We’ve listed one strategy for each stage here, and you will find the complete list of strategies on our [website](#).**

In using this list, please keep in mind that all children learn differently, and for children who are deaf or hard of hearing, development will always be related to three critical areas:

- Age when child began using hearing technology *full-time*
- Access to qualified professionals (like the Clarke team)
- Level of parental involvement and engagement in the LSL process

*Note: The sample strategies that follow (and the full list on [Clarke’s website](#)) are meant to optimize a child’s auditory skill development. These LSL strategies are critical to a child’s overall development and are designed to activate the auditory centers of the brain. If these strategies are in place and you feel confident using them, feel free to move to the strategies listed in the other areas of development.*

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— Sherri Fickenscher, MS, LSLS Cert. AVEd, education support specialist at Clarke

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## Beginning Listeners

For children who are deaf or hard of hearing, this time period is defined as 6-12 months after they've established full-time use of their hearing technology. Full-time use of technology is directly correlated to a child's ability to reach their full potential, so to make the most of this crucial time period, young children should have access to sound as soon as possible.

Below is a sample strategy to support this developmental stage. [Find more tips and techniques for beginning listeners.](#)

### STRATEGY: Monitor the Listening Environment

Children with typical hearing learn early to tune out background noise, but children who are deaf or hard of hearing are not able to do this very easily. Television, music or multiple speakers in the same area create a difficult listening environment for them. The optimal listening environment is one where there are not many sounds all vying for your child's auditory attention. Keeping it quieter will make it easier for your child to hear those quiet speech sounds like 's,' 'sh' and 'f,' for example.

This doesn't mean you can't listen to music. The Clarke team encourages a good dance party, so turn on your favorite tunes and dance away. Watch what your child does when the music stops.



When spending time at home with beginning listeners, don't hesitate to put on your favorite music!



## Pre-Talkers

Before children begin talking, they indicate their understanding of spoken words. Many caregivers expect to move directly to talking, but this is an important phase. Babies typically listen for a full year before saying their first word, so the child who is deaf or hard of hearing often needs that full year of listening before saying their first word too. This waiting can be filled with anxiety for families as they're eager to hear their child speak. However, if the focus is solely on the first expressive word, then caregivers may miss all the exciting milestones that lead up to that first word—like watching a child learn to understand receptive language, or the first time a caregiver says “bye-bye” and sees the child wave. These events reveal important information: the child's technology is working! Sound not only has meaning, but words have meaning too. These are reasons to celebrate, as a child who is deaf or hard of hearing is preparing to talk.

This pre-talking phase is also defined by vocalizing, babbling (putting a consonant and vowel sound together) and jargoning (connecting a long stream of vowels and consonants together). Caregivers are coached to listen carefully for a true word.

Once the child has worn their technology for 6-12 months, and depending on their age, but as close to 10-14 months as possible, the Clarke team is hoping to hear that first word. Until then, and even after, Clarke professionals—in collaboration with families—can continue to focus on the child's understanding of the spoken word (receptive language).

Below is a sample strategy to support this developmental stage. [Find more tips and techniques for pre-talkers.](#)

## STRATEGY: Take Turns

Research is abundantly clear: **turn-taking between a child and their caregivers builds stronger brains!**

Another term often used for this back-and-forth is “serve and return.” Imagine a tennis match when you’re interacting with your child as a reminder to take turns when speaking. When someone hits you a ball, your goal is to return that ball. Using turn-taking, caregivers learn to wait for a non-verbal or verbal response from a child before they take another turn in the communication exchange.

Infants may coo or kick their feet as a conversational turn, while a three-year-old child is expected to give an appropriate verbal response. The goal is to elicit participation from the infant or child.

With infants this can also involve imitation. When a baby coos at the caregiver, the caregiver can take a turn by cooing back. Or the adult can pretend to have a conversation with the baby even though there are no true words. For instance:

**BABY:** coos

**ADULT:** coos back imitating baby

**BABY:** coos

**ADULT:** “Wow! Tell me more about that!”

**BABY:** smiles

**ADULT:** “oh...did that make you happy when that happened?”

The content of the turn-taking will eventually become more complex, and this LSL strategy should always be in use even when your child becomes an established conversationalist.



Clarke families are encouraged to try conversational “turn-taking” with their pre-talkers. The goal is to elicit participation from the infant or child.



## Beginning Talkers

Your child has said their first word! This is a momentous occasion, so feel free to celebrate! LSL strategies continue to be important as your child is now considered a beginning talker. Now the goal becomes to expand vocabulary and the number of words your child uses.

Below is a sample strategy to support this developmental stage. [Find more tips and techniques for beginning talkers.](#)

### STRATEGY: Auditory Closure

Auditory closure is one way to engage your beginning talker in the art of turn-taking and building conversation. Auditory closure occurs when an adult begins a song or sentence, but doesn't complete it – prompting a response. This encourages the child to give a verbal response, which often happens naturally.

Remember that favorite book your child insists you read each night? What would happen if you started reading a page and then stopped? *Brown Bear, Brown Bear* by Eric Carle is a favorite for many children. Try reading half a sentence, then pause and wait to see if your child responds.

Singing is another great way to practice auditory closure. What would happen if you started to sing “Baby shark—” and stopped there? What would your child do? Would they move their body to indicate they recognize you are singing? Would they vocalize the next phrase? You may be surprised, so give it a try.



Clarke parent Natalia and son Emmanuel attend an Infant-Toddler Group at Clarke (prior to the COVID-19 pandemic).



## Established Conversationalist

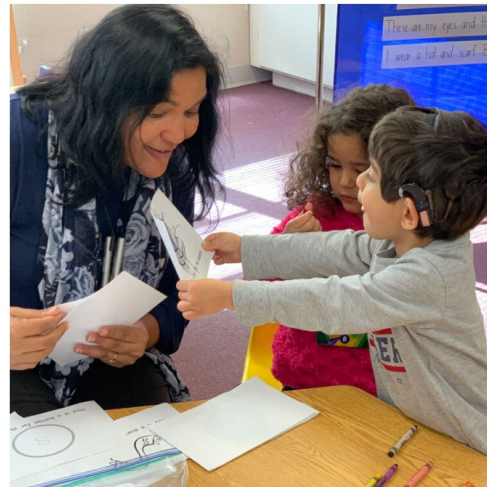
An established conversationalist is comfortable chatting and asking questions. How to know if your child is an established conversationalist: Don't be surprised if you catch yourself wishing your child would stop talking for a minute! It's a positive milestone and something many families experience.

Below is a sample strategy to support this developmental stage. [Find more tips and techniques for established conversationalists.](#)

### STRATEGY: Ask Open-Ended Questions

Once your child has mastered yes/no questions—because this is a necessary developmental skill—begin asking open-ended questions. Open-ended questions are questions that require more than a yes/no answer. They keep the conversational volley going while yes/no questions tend to stop conversations. They also offer adults the opportunity to gain insight into what the child is thinking, feeling or curious about. It often takes practice to develop this habit. Here are some examples of how to get started:

- “What was something good that happened today?” (**instead of** “Did you have a good day?”)
- “Who was in school today?” (**instead of** “Was Roberto at school today?”)
- “How did that make you feel?” (**instead of** “Did that make you happy?”)
- “When did you play outside today?” (**instead of** “Did you play outside today?”)



Clarke Teacher of the Deaf Geeta Shandilya with Clarke students (*prior to the COVID-19 pandemic*).

Remember when “Why?” was your child's favorite question? “Why” questions help a child make sense of their world. And now it can be your turn. For example, try asking:

- Why do you think that happened?
- Why do you think we need to brush our teeth?

When adults begin asking “Why?” questions, the answer is often “I don't know.” But caregivers can encourage guessing. You can also help by offering suggested answers.

Open-ended questions encourage critical thinking skills, so create a list to help you until it becomes more intuitive.

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## Find the complete list of strategies on our [website](#).

While these suggestions should serve as a valuable guide to families, they are no substitute for the interdisciplinary support required by children who are deaf or hard of hearing—including an audiologist, speech-language pathologist and teacher of the deaf. Sherri notes, “It is a professional's role to observe your communication with your child and to support you in taking it to the next level.”