

OWL to Let Your Child Lead

Letting your child lead begins with OWL:

Observe

Wait

Listen



The first letters of these three important words can help you remember them.

OWLing is an important strategy that you can use with your child throughout an interaction. When you OWL, you open up all sorts of opportunities for communication. You may even discover that your child is communicating more than you realized.

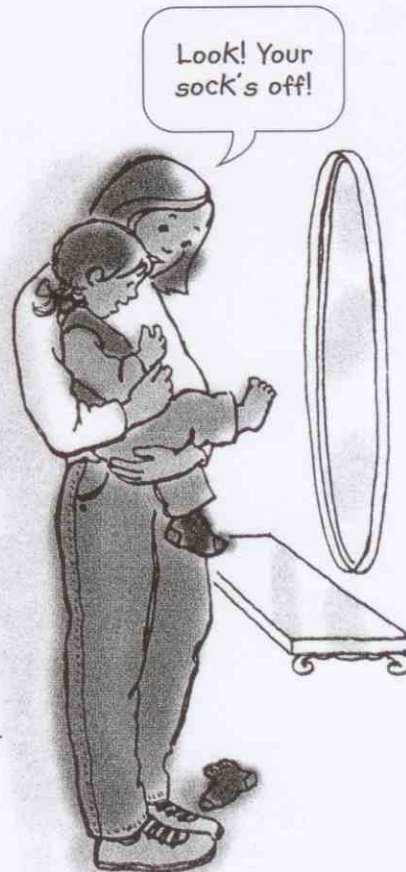
*Observe, Wait and Listen:
Taking the time to OWL is
a wise way to start.*

Observe



Sometimes it's hard to know what's on your child's mind. Taking the time to observe her body language – her actions, gestures and facial expressions – will help you figure it out. By tuning in to these messages, you can learn a lot about what she's interested in and what she wants to tell you. Notice what your child is looking at. Look in the direction in which she's reaching or pointing. Discovering what has captured your child's interest will help you share the moment with her.

Mom was trying to get Megan to look in the mirror, but then she observed that Megan was more interested in something else – her sock had come off. Now they can talk about what Megan is really interested in.



Wait



Waiting is a powerful tool. It gives you time to observe what your child is interested in. Even more importantly, it gives your child time to start an interaction or respond to what you've said or done. In this book, *wait* means three things: **stop talking, lean forward and look at your child**

expectantly. Your child may be used

to everyone else doing the communicating. Waiting in this way will send her the message that you're ready for her to respond to you or, better still, to take the lead herself. Once your child does one of these things, it's important for you to respond to her immediately. (You'll learn more about how to do this in Chapter 3.)

If you need to remind yourself to wait, count slowly to 10 – silently, of course. At first, you may not be used to that much silence. Your child may not be used to it either. But be patient and don't rush to say something. It may take some time for her to communicate with you. If your child switches from one activity to another, wait

again. Give her a chance to get involved in the new activity. Then give her still more time to start an interaction.

The most important thing to remember about waiting is to give your child enough time to understand that you expect her to send you a message – any message. It doesn't matter whether she sends it with sounds, words or gestures. Anything that your child does or says to make her needs or interests known to you is a message. Take another look at the Expression side of the checklist you completed in Chapter 1, "My Child's Stage of Communication Development." There you'll find some of the ways in which your child may send a message.



Instead of answering the door when the doorbell rings, Robert's dad waits. This gives Robert a chance to tell him there's someone at the door.

Listen



Listening means paying close attention to all of your child's words and sounds. Take care not to interrupt her, even if you've already figured out what she's telling you. When you listen to your child's message, you're also letting her know that what she says is important to you. This helps build her confidence and self-esteem.

Even when you OWL, there will be times when you cannot understand your child's message. This can be frustrating for both of you. At times like these, look at the situation for clues and guess what she's trying to tell you.



Elizabeth's mom listens carefully and realizes that Elizabeth is trying to say Kitty.

If you can't even begin to guess your child's message, imitate her sounds or actions and then wait to see if she does anything to make her message clearer. You may still not understand, but it's important to make the effort. When you do, you let her know that you're trying your best to understand her. You're also showing her that what's on her mind is very important to you.

OWLing at Different Stages

Children send messages in different ways as their communication develops. At each stage you need to **Observe, Wait and Listen** carefully to what your child is “telling” you.

OWL with Discoverers

A Discoverer doesn't send messages to you intentionally. But when you observe her carefully, you'll get important clues about what she needs and what she's interested in.

A Discoverer who is very young or who has developmental or medical challenges goes through many stages of sleep and wakefulness during the day. These stages affect how ready she is to interact with you. By OWLing, you can tell when a Discoverer is most ready to interact. She may stop moving, or she may look toward you or smile. She may also move her arms and legs or make cooing or babbling sounds (especially when you're talking or singing to her).

A Discoverer will also let you know when she is *not* ready to interact – usually when she is hungry, tired or uncomfortable. If she's not ready to interact, she may look away, cry, fuss, squirm or frown. Then, she may need a break or she may need your help to calm down.



When she OWLs, Colin's mom sees that he's fascinated by his mobile.

It's important to respond immediately when a Discoverer does something that seems to send a message. For example, she may make cooing sounds when she's feeling content. When you smile and coo back right away, you help her learn that cooing is a good way to get your attention. This helps her make the communication connection (see page 6) – the important step that takes her to the next stage of communication.

OWL with Communicators

When your child starts sending messages *intentionally*, she has reached the Communicator stage. At this stage, she may communicate a lot, even though she doesn't use any real words yet. Remember to OWL: Observe her body language. Listen to her sounds. Wait to give her the time she needs to start an interaction. Then let her lead the communication.

Even though Megan's mom is busy buying groceries, she OWLs to give Megan a chance to show her the banana. Then she responds with interest.



OWL with First Words Users and Combiners

Even when your child can talk, you still need to OWL to encourage her to talk even more. Another reason to OWL with First Words Users and Combiners is that what they say can sometimes be hard to understand. But when you OWL, you can usually figure out what they mean.



Scott's mom wonders why Scott has said the word ball. When she OWLs, she sees that he's pointing at the moon, which to him looks like a big round ball.

Alicia's mom listens carefully. Then she understands that Alicia is asking her whether she has a hat.



Take the focus off getting your child to talk

Asking your child to say words for you doesn't really help her learn language. In fact, it can have the opposite effect because it takes the joy out of communication. Your child knows when you really want to communicate with her and when you just want to hear her say a word.



Pressuring Graham to talk makes him talk less. It also makes playing with the toy kitchen a lot less fun.

When Graham's mom takes the focus off talking, she lets Graham lead. Then he communicates because he has something he wants to say.

The desire to communicate comes from having something to say and knowing someone will listen. So instead of making your child repeat words after you, let her lead the communication and then follow her lead. If you need to remind yourself to take the pressure off, a good rule of thumb is "Don't say say."

Note that "letting your child lead" doesn't mean letting her rule. There are times when you should not let your child lead. For example, she may put something dangerous in her mouth or pour water on the floor. These are times for you to set limits, to say no and to help your child find another activity. The activities that will help your child learn language are the ones that allow the two of you to connect and have fun together.