

The Speech & Language Activity Library

42 zero-prep activities for the skills that screening flags - the legwork, done

Who this is for

Your class has been screened, a child has come back needing targeted support, and somebody - usually a TA - now needs a daily activity that actually works that skill. This library is that "now what". Every activity uses things already in the room, takes five to ten minutes, and names exactly what to write down afterwards.

How it's organised

Seven skill areas, six activities each: attention & listening, understanding words & instructions, vocabulary & concepts, saying more (first words to sentences), questions & thinking, sequencing & stories, and play, turn-taking & interaction. Every activity has a Make it easier and a Make it harder line, because the same six children never need the same six versions.

The two habits that make any of it work

One: pick ONE activity and repeat it daily for a week - familiarity is what lets a child's language grow inside a game. Two: write one line down each time (each activity tells you what). A week of one-liners is evidence; a month of them is a progress story.

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Attention & Listening

1 Ready, Steady...

You need: A swing, a tickle, bubbles, a car ramp — anything with a GO moment.

Play the game a few times with a big "Ready... steady... GO!" Then pause before GO and wait. The child's look, wriggle, sound or word IS the request. Then GO, joyfully.

Easier: Shorten the pause to a heartbeat. · Harder: Wait for a clearer signal each time — a look, then a sound, then the word "go".

Write down: *How the child asked for GO — look, movement, sound or word — and how long they could wait.*

2 Sound Hide & Seek

You need: A phone playing music, a wind-up toy or a ticking timer.

Hide the sound-maker somewhere in the room while the child hides their eyes. They find it using only their ears. Swap: they hide it for you and watch you listen.

Easier: Louder sound, smaller room, "warmer/colder" clues. · Harder: Quieter sound, or two sound-makers — find the music, ignore the ticking.

Write down: *Whether the child paused to listen before moving, and how long they searched.*

3 The Stop-and-Go Band

You need: Anything bangable: pan lids, boxes, shakers. A green card and a red card.

Everyone plays when green is up and freezes on red. Start predictable, get sneaky. Then the child holds the cards and controls the whole band — the best part.

Easier: Add saying "STOP!" and "GO!" with the cards. · Harder: Cards only, no words — eyes do all the listening work.

Write down: *How quickly they stopped, and whether they managed the leader role.*

4 Whose Voice Is That?

You need: Two or more familiar people, or short voice recordings on a phone.

The child closes their eyes; someone says hello (or an animal sound). Who was it? Recordings of family or classmates make this endlessly replayable.

Easier: Very different voices, big differences. · Harder: Similar voices, whispers, or "who said it AND what did they say?"

Write down: *Recognising familiar voices without looking — a lovely listening milestone to date.*

5 Copy My Beat

You need: Your hands, or two spoons and a saucepan each.

Clap or tap a tiny rhythm — just two beats to start. The child copies. Grow it slowly. Swap: they lead and you copy, including their mistakes, which is hilarious.

Easier: Two slow beats, exaggerated movement. · Harder: Longer patterns, loud-and-quiet beats, or rhythm-only ("no watching my hands").

Write down: *The longest pattern copied, and whether they enjoyed leading.*

6 The Listening Walk

You need: Ten minutes and somewhere to walk, indoors or out.

Walk together collecting sounds — a dog, a bus, a hand-dryer. Count them on fingers. At the end, list what you heard. Bonus: draw the sounds afterwards.

Easier: You spot the sounds, the child points to where they came from. · Harder: The child retells the whole list later, to someone who wasn't there.

Write down: *How many sounds they noticed and named, and any they recalled later unprompted.*

Understanding Words & Instructions

1 Teddy's Silly Orders

You need: A teddy and everyday furniture.

Give teddy instructions through the child: "Put teddy UNDER the chair." Start with one idea, add more. Keep some orders silly — teddy in the fruit bowl keeps everyone playing.

Easier: One key word: "give teddy a DRINK" with only two objects out. · Harder: Grow to three key words: "put the LITTLE teddy UNDER the BIG chair."

Write down: *How many key words the instruction really tested (count the choices!), and the prompt level.*

2 The Choosing Table

You need: 4-8 everyday objects that differ by size and colour — socks, cups, cars.

Lay out the choices. Ask for items by their features: "the red sock... the BIG red sock." The choices on the table decide the difficulty — more similar items, harder task.

Easier: Two very different objects. · Harder: Six similar objects, and keep your eyes on the child, not the answer — no accidental clues.

Write down: *"Chose the big red sock from six items" — with the number of choices recorded.*

3 Simon Didn't Say

You need: Nothing at all.

Classic Simon Says but nobody is ever out — a wrong move just gets a giggle and a replay. Actions with body parts sneak in vocabulary: "touch your ELBOW."

Easier: You do the action too, child copies (watch-and-do). · Harder: Words only, hands behind your back, two-part actions: "clap, then sit down."

Write down: *Followed spoken instructions without a model — the moment worth dating.*

4 Treasure Missions

You need: The room you're in and a container.

Send the child on two-step missions: "Get the spoon, THEN put it in the box." Real jobs work brilliantly — children love missions that matter.

Easier: One step, with a point to help. · Harder: Three steps, or add a location: "the spoon from the KITCHEN."

Write down: *Steps held in mind: one, two or three — the cleanest possible progress measure.*

5 Dress-Up Gone Wrong

You need: A hat, gloves, scarf — any wearables.

The child follows dressing instructions — but sometimes ask for silliness: "put the hat on your FOOT." Getting silly right proves they understood the words, not the routine.

Easier: Sensible instructions with a gesture. · Harder: All silly, no gestures: "put the glove on your ear."

Write down: *Following instructions AGAINST expectation — strong evidence the words did the work.*

6 Show Me the...

You need: Any picture book with busy pages.

Instead of reading, hunt: "Show me the cat... show me the cat SLEEPING... show me what the girl is holding." Any book becomes a listening game.

Easier: "Where's the dog?" with one obvious dog. · Harder: "Show me the little dog that's running" — features and actions combined.

Write down: *Understanding of action words and describing words, not just object names.*

Vocabulary & Concepts

1 The Everything Bag

You need: A pillowcase and 5-6 objects from around the room.

The child pulls an object out and names it. Level up: feel without looking and describe first — "it's soft... it's the teddy!" Swap roles; you describe, they guess.

Easier: Familiar objects, name after seeing. · Harder: Describe by feel using two clues before revealing.

Write down: *New words used, and describing words (soft, cold, bumpy) alongside names.*

2 Odd One Out Plates

You need: Three items, two related: apple, banana... toothbrush.

Which one doesn't belong? The gold is in the WHY: "because apple and banana are FOOD." Category words — food, animals, clothes — are vocabulary's scaffolding.

Easier: Wildly different odd one out. · Harder: Subtler sets: cow, pig... seagull (farm vs not). Child builds a set to catch YOU out.

Write down: *The category word, in the child's own words, is the evidence.*

3 Big & Little Hunt

You need: The room, or the whole house/classroom.

Hunt in pairs: a big spoon and a little spoon, big shoe, little shoe. Line up the pairs. Then hunt other opposites — long/short, heavy/light, rough/smooth.

Easier: You find the big one, they find its little partner. · Harder: Three sizes: big, bigger, biggest — comparatives are a real step up.

Write down: *Concept words used correctly: which pairs, which opposites, how independently.*

4 Position Parkour

You need: A teddy and three bits of furniture.

Build teddy an obstacle course: IN the box, ON the cushion, UNDER the table. Narrate the journey together. Then the child directs teddy's route and you obey.

Easier: Two positions only: in and on. · Harder: Add behind, next to, between; child gives the instructions.

Write down: Which position words are understood, and which are USED — often different lists.

5 Word Collector

You need: A theme and ten fingers.

Pick today's theme — kitchen, park, vehicles. Collect ten theme words through the day, counted on fingers. Revisit the collection at home time: how many come back?

Easier: Five words, gathered together with objects in hand. · Harder: Ten words recalled later, no objects, plus one describing word each.

Write down: Words recalled at the end of the day — retention, not just exposure.

6 Same & Different

You need: Two similar objects: two cups, two toy cars.

Find one thing that's the SAME and one thing that's DIFFERENT. "Both cups... but this one's red." This little structure is the engine of describing and comparing.

Easier: You offer the sentence, child finishes it. · Harder: Two pictures instead of objects; three same, three different.

Write down: Comparisons made independently — same/different is a thinking skill made visible.

Saying More: First Words to Sentences

1 The Pause That Asks

You need: Bubbles, a swing, tickles — the child's favourite irresistible thing.

Do the wonderful thing. Stop. Wait, looking expectant. ANY communication — a look, a reach, a sound, a word — makes it happen again instantly. You are teaching: communicating works.

Easier: Accept the smallest signal and celebrate it. · Harder: Gently hold out for the next rung: sound where there was a look, word where there was a sound.

Write down: *The child's current "ask" — and every time it climbs a rung, date it.*

2 Add One Word

You need: The words the child already says.

Whatever the child says, hand it back with ONE word added. "Car!" → "Fast car!" "Dog gone" → "Yes, the dog RAN away... dog ran!" No testing, no "say it" — just serve the next size up.

Easier: Repeat their word warmly first, then add one. · Harder: Add describing words and position words, not just verbs.

Write down: *Longest spontaneous combination this week — one word? two? three?*

3 The Commentator

You need: The child, playing. That's it.

Narrate their play like a gentle sportscaster: "The car's going up... oh! It fell down!" No questions at all for five minutes. Questions demand; commentary gives. Children borrow the words you give.

Easier: Slow, short phrases, lots of pauses. · Harder: Sneak in juicy verbs and concepts: "it's balancing... it toppled!"

Write down: *Words of yours the child borrows later — commentary's quiet magic.*

4 Photo Chat

You need: 5-10 photos on a phone: the child's day, family, pets.

Look together. Let the child lead: whatever they say, expand it. Photos of their OWN life beat any flashcard — motivation is half of expressive language.

Easier: You point and name, child confirms or copies. · Harder: Child tells the photo's story to a third person while you resist helping.

Write down: *Spontaneous comments (not answers to questions) — the difference matters.*

5 The Puppet Who Gets It Wrong

You need: Any puppet or teddy with a confident personality.

The puppet names things wrongly: "Ooh, a banana!" (it's a shoe). Children who won't "perform" words will fall over themselves to CORRECT them. Being right is irresistible.

Easier: Obvious errors, puppet very silly. · Harder: Puppet gets sentences wrong too: "the dog is flying!" — child fixes the whole sentence.

Write down: *Corrections! The child produces language nobody asked them to perform.*

6 Colour-Coded Sentences, Unplugged

You need: Paper strips in orange, yellow and green; a pen.

Draw or write WHO on orange, DOING on yellow, WHAT on green. Build silly sentences left to right, say them together, act them out. (Our free Sentence Spark game and card pack use the same colours — table and screen teach each other.)

Easier: Two parts only: who + doing. · Harder: Add blue WHERE cards; child builds and reads back alone.

Write down: *Longest sentence built, and whether word order held without help.*

Questions & Thinking

1 What's In My Head?

You need: Nothing, or a bag of objects for support.

Describe something without naming it: "It's an animal... it's little... it says squeak." Child guesses, then — the real work — swaps roles and describes for you.

Easier: Object visible in a choice of three. · Harder: No objects, three clues from the child, category first.

Write down: *Clues the child GIVES — describing from memory is high-level vocabulary work.*

2 Question of the Day

You need: Snack time and one well-pitched question.

One question, every day, same moment: "What did you play outside?" Pitch it at their level (see our questioning guide) and let everyone answer, adult included — your answer is the model.

Easier: "Show me" answers welcome; offer two choices. · Harder: Move up a level monthly: what happened → what might happen → why.

Write down: *The question level answered without help — a beautiful once-a-term progress line.*

3 Why-Because Tennis

You need: Nothing.

Serve silly why-questions and bat "because" answers back and forth: "Why do we wear wellies?" Wrong answers are allowed and funny; the word BECAUSE is the muscle being trained.

Easier: Offer two because-options to choose from. · Harder: Child serves the whys; chains: "...and why THAT?"

Write down: *Any spontaneous "because" sentence — date the first one, it's a milestone.*

4 The Prediction Jar

You need: A jar of water and small objects: coin, cork, crayon, leaf.

Before each object drops: "Sink or float?" Predict, test, react. Prediction is level-3 thinking disguised as splashing. "You said sink... it FLOATED!"

Easier: Copy your prediction, enjoy the result. · Harder: Predict AND say why: "the coin is heavy, so..."

Write down: *Predictions made before the event — thinking beyond the here-and-now.*

5 Detective Pictures

You need: Any busy picture: a spread from a book, a street scene.

Work the ladder on one picture: What can you see? (1) What's happening? (2) What happens next? How does she feel? (3) Why? (4). Stop climbing where the child stops; work just below.

Easier: Stay at "show me" and "what's this?" · Harder: Cover half the picture: "what do you think is hiding?"

Write down: *The highest level answered — and the level where they needed you.*

6 Fix the Problem

You need: Everyday tiny disasters, real or staged.

Teddy's cup is broken. The door is stuck. We've run out of glue. Ask the room: "What should we do?" Solving small problems in words is reasoning practice with a purpose.

Easier: Two solutions to choose between. · Harder: "What ELSE could we do?" — second solutions are harder than first ones.

Write down: *Solutions offered in words, and whether alternatives came with prompting.*

Sequencing & Stories

1 First, Then, Last Photos

You need: A phone camera and any routine.

Photograph three steps of a real routine — coat on, walking, arriving. Print or show on screen: the child puts them in order and retells with "first... then... last."

Easier: Two photos, big difference between steps. · Harder: Four or five steps; retell tomorrow from memory.

Write down: *Sequencing words used, and steps ordered without help.*

2 Cooking Commentary

You need: Toast, squash, a sandwich — any two-minute "recipe".

Say the plan first: "FIRST bread, THEN butter, LAST jam." Do it, narrating. Then the child retells the whole process to someone who missed it. Real food is unbeatable motivation.

Easier: Child does the actions while you say the words. · Harder: Child instructs YOU step by step and you obey exactly — errors included.

Write down: *The retell: how many steps, in order, to a genuine audience.*

3 Story Bag Retell

You need: Three props from a story the child knows well.

A spoon, a bowl and a teddy retell Goldilocks. Hand over props one at a time as the story reaches them. The props carry the sequence so the child's words can fly.

Easier: You tell, child moves the props on cue. · Harder: Child retells alone; then swap one prop and see the story bend.

Write down: *Story elements in order: beginning, middle, end — even in gestures and single words.*

4 Today, Backwards

You need: The day you've just had.

"We're home... before that, the bus... before THAT?" Telling the day backwards is funny and surprisingly hard. Fix it together forwards afterwards: "so FIRST we..."

Easier: Just two events: now, and before now. · Harder: The whole afternoon backwards, then forwards with all the sequence words.

Write down: *Memory for real events, and sequence words when re-ordering.*

5 Comic Strip Me

You need: Paper folded into three boxes, a pen.

Draw something the child did — three scenes, stick figures welcome. Caption each box together in their words. The child stars in their own story; retelling follows naturally.

Easier: You draw, child tells you what goes in each box. · Harder: Child draws AND captions, then reads their comic to the class/family.

Write down: *A recorded narrative in the child's own words — keep the comic as the evidence.*

6 The Tiny Tale

You need: Nothing.

Build one-sentence stories together: SOMEONE + DID SOMETHING + THEN A SURPRISE. "A dog found a sock... and it ROARED!" Take turns supplying parts. Tiny stories, real narrative bones.

Easier: You supply two parts, child adds one. · Harder: Child tells a whole tiny tale, then stretches it: "and THEN what?"

Write down: *Story parts supplied independently — character, event or (the hard one) the twist.*

Play, Turn-Taking & Interaction

1 My Turn, Your Turn Tower

You need: A pile of blocks, bricks or boxes.

Build one tower strictly alternately, announcing "MY turn... YOUR turn" every time. The tower only grows through turn-taking. The crash at the end is the shared reward.

Easier: Hand the block over as you say "your turn". · Harder: Three builders; waiting through TWO turns is the real test.

Write down: *Waiting for a turn, and using turn language unprompted.*

2 The Passing Game

You need: A ball, a toy car and a ramp, or anything that travels.

Roll it over, then wait. The child must reconnect — a look, a sound, "more!", your name — before it comes back. The game itself teaches that interaction keeps good things going.

Easier: A glance is enough; return it fast and joyfully. · Harder: Hold for eye contact PLUS a word; add a third player.

Write down: *What the child does to restart the game — the request, in whatever form.*

3 Copy Me, Copy You

You need: Nothing.

Copy exactly what the child does — their taps, sounds, wiggles. Most children notice fast and start testing you, which means THEY are leading an interaction. Then swap: your turn to lead.

Easier: Copy big obvious actions with delight. · Harder: Copying chains: they lead three moves, then you lead three.

Write down: *The moment they notice and take charge — initiation, made visible.*

4 The Waiting Snack

You need: Snack time, served in deliberately tiny portions.

One grape. Two raisins. A splash of juice. Requesting "more" a dozen genuine times beats any flashcard drill — real hunger for the game does the teaching.

Easier: Accept a point or a sound; model "more". · Harder: Hold out for "more juice please" — two then three words.

Write down: *The request used, counted: how many times, at what level, how independently.*

5 Roll & Greet

You need: A ball and at least three people.

Roll the ball with names attached: "To ALI!" Ali rolls on: "to SAM!" Names, greeting, watching, waiting — the entire social toolkit hiding inside one rolling ball.

Easier: Adult guides the ball and says the name with the child. · Harder: Add "hello" with the name, or a question with each roll.

Write down: *Names used, attention to whose turn it is, waiting without leaving.*

6 Pretend Together

You need: Whatever the child is already playing.

Join their pretend world and follow their rules. Add exactly ONE new idea per session — the teddy gets thirsty, the car needs petrol — then follow again. Shared pretending is where language and friendship rehearse.

Easier: Imitate their play alongside them first (parallel play). · Harder: Your ONE idea introduces a problem to solve together.

Write down: *Whether your idea was accepted and built on — shared imagination is the milestone.*