

LENA's 14 Talking Tips are research-based techniques for increasing early interaction. Adult-child interactions are very important for early brain growth, language skills, and social-emotional development. Use these strategies to help the children in your care identify, understand, and respond to their emotions.

1. Talk about what you're doing and thinking.

Describe your own feelings and how you handle situations. The more children hear healthy emotional expressions and see appropriate behavior modeled, the better they can understand their own emotions and actions.

- "When my block tower falls over, I feel frustrated. How do you feel?"
- "Look, my sister sent me this beautiful card in the mail! I feel so valued!"

2. Comment on what they're doing or looking at.

Add words to a child's emotions! Labeling helps children recognize and vocalize the strong emotions they might be feeling.

- "You look excited to play at the activity center! Let's wait patiently together for your turn."
- "I can tell you don't like that loud noise. Let's go somewhere quieter."
- "I noticed how you invited your friend to sit by you. That made them feel happy!"



3. Name things that they're interested in.

To support responsible decision making, offer choices based on their interests. Then discuss their ideas.

- "Throwing the ball like that isn't safe for our friends. Should we kick it back and forth or bounce it up and down?"
- "You really enjoy building things. What should we build with next: waffle blocks or wooden blocks?"

4. Get down to their level: face to face.

Support children in learning how to problem solve, especially during activities they might find challenging. Be specific when offering praise to children about their efforts.

- "I like how you and Mateo made a plan so that you each could have a turn on the swings!"
- "Crash! Your tower fell over. Don't worry, we can rebuild it together."



5. Touch, hug, hold.

Support a child's autonomy and sense of self. Model respectful behavior by describing and explaining your actions, as well as valuing their personal space.

- "Welcome to the classroom! Would you like a hug, fist bump, or high-five today?"
- "I can tell you don't like what he is doing. Say, 'I don't like it when you touch my hair. Please stop.'"

6. Tune in and respond to what they look at, do, and say.

Understanding a child's emotional cues helps caregivers respond immediately while modeling healthy behavior.

- "I see your face is frowning. How are you feeling?"
- "I notice you taking turns playing with the ball! What a great way to play together!"



7. Wait for their response.

Actively involve the child in identifying and practicing positive behaviors. Help them investigate the reasons behind any problems, as well as provide opportunities for application and self reflection.

- “Do you remember when they were upset? What did they do to calm down? Let’s try it.”
- “Look how excited Lyla is for her birthday celebration! How do you think she’s feeling?”



8. Imitate them, and add words.

For some children, it may be difficult to identify when they experience more complex emotions such as being nervous, jealous, frightened, worried, or embarrassed. Provide additional vocabulary to talk about how they are feeling.

- “I saw you sitting by yourself. Sometimes I like to sit alone when I’m scared or worried. Are you feeling any of those things?”

9. Make faces, use gestures.

Align body language and facial expressions with verbal cues to help children learn to recognize emotions in others.

- “When I am feeling sad, my mouth goes down. When I am feeling happy, my mouth goes up. How do you look when you are happy?”
- “Look at the girl in this picture! Her eyes are wide and her mouth is open. Do you think she is feeling surprised?”



10. Take turns — don’t do all the talking.

Help children build healthy communication skills by supporting attentive listening practices and responding appropriately.

- “Lian is about to share. Let’s give him our full attention: eyes, ears, and hearts are listening.”
- “You want to play with that toy but she is using it right now. What can you say to her?”

11. Repeat and add to what they say and do.

Support children in practicing ways to respectfully handle conflict with others. Affirm what they are telling you, then add an appropriate next step.

- “You look frustrated because your friend took the toy you were playing with. Let’s talk with them about taking turns.”
- “You are upset because she chose our morning book. You can choose our book for afternoon reading time.”

12. Follow their lead, do what interests them.

Help children understand that their voice and opinions matter.

- “I know you like to build and draw. But we only have time for one more thing — what should we do?”
- “Kenji really likes dinosaurs, but Dalip would rather play with puppets. What do you like to play with?”



13. Encourage them, be positive.

Communicate caring and positive responsiveness even when a child’s behavior may be challenging.

- “Instead of grabbing the toy, ask if you can play. Say, ‘Can I play with you?’”
- “Let’s try saying that again using kinder words. That way everyone feels good.”

14. Be silly! Relax and have fun!

Plan a game, song, or story to introduce new and more complex feeling words.

- “I’m going to make a face. How do you think I am feeling?”