

This handout covers information from the workshop held for community partners, parents, caregivers and others, living in York Region. The information and resources provided below is by no means an exhaustive list but can support your journey in advancing your understanding of the topic.

The Role of Language in Children's Mental Health

Language & Children's Mental Health

- Language is the human ability to understand & express ideas using words.
- Language plays an important role in supporting children's mental health. It supports self-regulation, academic learning, emotion regulation and social problem solving.

Language Tips for Serve and Return:

- Have a 'to and from' conversation where speakers build on what the previous speaker said ("Yes and..." vs "No but...").
- Don't allow anyone - even adults - to dominate the conversation. Share the conversation space evenly.
- The role of adults is to guide the conversation. Your tools include facilitating and modeling (not telling or directing).
- Use open-ended questions like, "What do you think she's feeling?" rather than closed ended questions i.e. "Is she sad?"
- Set clear ground rules for the conversation. These can include rules on turn taking, listening and respecting everyone's ideas. Everyone must agree to these rules.

Strong relationships support language development.

Set the stage for a great conversation by being:

- Playful - Relax, be genuine and enjoy the interaction.
- Accepting - Everyone has a voice and a valid perspective.
- Curious - Be interested in the young person and what they have to say.
- Empathetic - Try to see if from the other person's point of view
- Patient - Give others time to understand and express their ideas.



Communication Strategies: Think Like an SLP

- Non-verbal Communication: Notice your own body language, facial expressions and tone of voice and try to be calm, open and friendly. Keep background noise to a minimum.
- Listening: Listen with your full attention, even if it is for a short time. Tic Nhat Han says “By listening with calm and understanding, we can ease the suffering of another person.”
- ‘Listen’ to Body Language as Well: Talk about what the young person’s body language is telling you. “You look a bit confused to me. Is that right?”
- Language: Keep it short and simple. Pause after you speak to allow time for understanding.
- Check Understanding: Do not assume the young person understands. Check in by asking them to share what they understood in their own words.

Language Tips for Talking About School

- Ask questions that encourage self-reflection. For example, “How did you figure that out?” or “What was helpful for you?”
- Ask questions that aim for improvement. For example, “What could you do even better or differently next time?”
- Generalize learning to different contexts. For example, “Who can you tell about what you learned?”, “What do you think they will say?”



Language Tips for Self-Regulation and Emotions

- Respond to the young person’s ideas with encouragement, for example, “tell me more about that” rather than giving your opinions or answers.
- Use words that talk about what’s going on inside people’s heads such as ‘think, know, believe, remember, reflect, consider’.
- Use words that describe emotions people are experiencing.
- Label the connection between emotion and action. For example, “She took a break because she was feeling angry and she wanted to calm down.”

Resources

[Raising Awareness of Developmental Language Disorder](#)

[Special Interest Research Group: Language and Communication Needs in Mental Health](#)

[How Caregivers Can Boost Young Brains](#)

Find us on:

