



## Creating Verbal Routines for Toddlers

Welcome to my *Creating Verbal Routines Therapy Guide* from [teachmetotalk.com](http://teachmetotalk.com) and [myei2.com](http://myei2.com)!

This *Therapy Guide* is designed to teach you how to develop and introduce verbal routines to toddlers with language delays and disorders.

All information is appropriate for committed parents, therapists, and other professionals who work with toddlers and young preschoolers with language delays and other developmental concerns.

*Creating Verbal Routines* is written in a "handout" format and may be copied and shared with families during sessions as long as my name and website information remain on the page. All other use is prohibited.

Good luck to you as you incorporate new verbal routines into therapy sessions and daily routines at home!



## WHAT IS A VERBAL ROUTINE?

Verbal routines are made up of words that are repeated at a predictable time during an activity. A verbal routine occurs any time a person says the same words, in the same way, for the same things, every time a specific context occurs. For example, common verbal routines are things like counting "1, 2, 3" before jumping in the pool or saying, "Ready, Set, Go!" as you roll a truck across the floor.

Verbal routines may come from traditional nursery rhymes, finger plays, or songs. Singing the same song before bedtime becomes a verbal routine. A child begins to recognize and then anticipate the words as his parents start to sing.

Verbal routines can also be completely original "scripts" that you create to accompany an event. These may include new games or songs that you make up on the spot while you're playing with a child. You both enjoy your new routine so much that it "sticks" and you play many, many times in the days, weeks, and months to come. The song or game may be so successful that you find yourself introducing it to other children. You've developed your own verbal routine.

The repetitiveness and predictability of a verbal routine make it easier for toddlers to understand the events and words that come next. After the child hears the same verbal routine over and over, the words seem to become "automatic," meaning that a child understands and says the word when the adult initiates the verbal routine.

All young children can benefit from verbal routines. Effective preschool and kindergarten teachers use this technique as they sing the same songs to accompany routines in their day. Parents can certainly learn to use verbal routines at home to enhance language development. SLPs can use this same advice to establish Verbal Routines with regular play activities during therapy sessions. By using a core set of vocabulary for each of a child's favorite play routines, you'll increase the likelihood that a child with receptive language delays will learn to link word meanings with specific objects and events. Eventually the child will begin to say those same words to "fill in the blank" when an adult begins the verbal routine and pauses for the child to complete the words.

While establishing your own Verbal Routines during play, select a few target words or short phrases that you'll use in the same way, for the same activity, each time you play. Remember that the main thing that's required for a verbal routine to be established is time! The child has to hear the routine often enough to recognize and remember it. It's extremely rare when a late talking toddler joins in a verbal routine during the first few occasions he hears the words.

Sometimes adults miss the value of verbal routines thinking that they need to change what they say to a child in order to introduce new vocabulary. While this is important for older preschoolers and school-aged children, the opposite can be true with toddlers who are late talkers. Using the same words for the same activities can actually help a young child learn to say words more quickly. Building on what our brains expect to hear can be very, very powerful for many late talkers.

Many experts recommend Verbal Routines for young children with language delays and disorders. References and resources are listed on the last page of this written therapy guide.



## BEGINNING, DURING, AND ENDING VERBAL ROUTINES FOR PLAY

Verbal routines can be developed for any toy or activity which occurs with set of predictable actions. Create verbal routines to use when beginning, ending, and even during a play routine.

### **Verbal Routines for Beginning Play**

Many experts recommend signaling a child that play is about to begin by using a specific verbal or visual routine. Preschool teachers may begin the day with the same song and require the class to sit on a rug for circle time or to listen to a story.

For therapy sessions, all of my toys are in 2 ½ gallon Ziploc bags so that a child can see what's inside, but must request the items before we play. To begin a therapy activity, I present the bag and say, "Zip!" as the child unzips the bag and then "Open!" each time we open the bag. If you're using this same kind of verbal routine, elongate both words while the child performs the actions such as saying, "Ziiiiiiiiiiiiip!" the entire time he unzips the bag. Using a sing-song tone of voice may motivate a child to begin to imitate your words. Since you're playing with several different toys in a therapy session, you'll use this same verbal routine many times each session.

### **Verbal Routines for During Play**

During an activity, no matter what toy you're playing with, establish some consistent verbal routines to convey meaning and emotion as you play. Holistic phrases are perfect examples for these kinds of verbal routines since they are fun for both toddlers and adults and can be used in a variety of situations. Holistic phrases are phrases that a child learns as one long word. These kinds of phrases may be the first multiple word utterances a child attempts. Examples of common holistic phrases are: I did it, I got it, I do it, What's that, Where'd it go, Here you go, There it is, Right here/Right there, No way, Aw man, Oh boy, and Oh no! Include these kinds of phrases as you go about your day.

### **Verbal Routines for Ending Play**

Establish a cleanup as the last part of every activity. Any song or chant will work for this purpose. Many educators and therapists sing the well-known "Clean Up" song from the PBS television show "Barney." Another option is the "Bye Bye Song" which is also great for teaching a child to wave and helping a child learn to say "bye bye." The words are:

"Bye bye \_\_\_\_\_. Bye bye \_\_\_\_\_. Bye bye \_\_\_\_\_. It's time to say good-bye."

Sing the same song as you end all of your play routines while you're cleaning up toys or other things around the house.

After a while start your verbal routine, but pause to see if the child will begin to "fill in" the words that come next.



## VERBAL ROUTINES FOR DAILY ACTIVITIES

Verbal routines can serve several purposes for a child at home. A verbal routine may help a child begin to understand new concepts during daily routines. A child may learn body parts more quickly if his parents devise a verbal routine for bath time by saying, "What will we wash next? Wash your belly. Wash wash wash. Now wash your toes. Wash wash wash. Wash your arms. Wash wash wash."

Many toddlers have difficulty with transitions during daily routines at home. Establishing verbal routines can help a child successfully move from one activity to the next because he learns what to expect. For daily routines such as eating lunch or taking a bath, introduce a song such as, "Do You Know What Time It Is?" Sing the words to the tune of "Do You Know the Muffin Man?"

**"Do you know what time it is? What time it is? What time it is?  
Do you know what time it is? It's bath time."**

The song can be modified to accommodate whatever daily routine comes next. Change the last words to fit your activity. For example, you can say lunch time, snack time, bed time, etc...

For a child who has difficulty with transitions such as coming inside or brushing his teeth, creating a verbal routine may make an unpleasant task a little easier. The one below is sung to the tune of "The Farmer in the Dell" and can be adapted with any words at the end of the phrase.

**"It's time to brush your teeth,  
It's time to brush your teeth,  
We've had some fun and played today,  
It's time to brush your teeth."**

Another version to try is to the tune of "Here We Go Round the Mulberry Bush."

**"This is the way we put on socks, put on socks, put on socks.  
This is the way we put on socks, early in the morning."**

Sing for various activities during the day such as: put on coat/shoes/shirt/pants, change your diaper, go inside, take a bath, wash your face, wash your hands, dry your hands, wash the table, eat our lunch, pick up toys/shoes, make the bed, sweep the floor, close the door, read a book, etc...

To develop these kinds of verbal routines, think about what song or chant would work best based on what a child likes and what he needs help learning to do. Adding movement to the verbal routine may also make the transition easier, particularly if you're moving toward the new area for the next activity. Remember to create a verbal routine that's fun for everyone - that means fun for the child and for you! As therapists in early intervention, model these kinds of verbal routines in sessions and teach parents how to use these verbal routines successfully at home.

Additional songs and play routines such as can be found in *Teach Me To Play WITH You* and *Teach Me To Talk: The Therapy Manual* from [teachmetotalk.com](http://teachmetotalk.com).



## VERBAL ROUTINES FOR TOYS

During play, verbal routines can be especially powerful for late talkers. The predictability and repetition will help a child learn what words mean and help a child begin to say new words within familiar play with a toy.

Select enticing, simple, high frequency words, and use them predictably each time you play with a specific toy. Look for multiple opportunities to work in the same verbal routines with a child with a related toy or activity. For example, you'll not only say "Ready Set Go" when you play with cars and trucks, but when you're beginning any activity with a "start" component such as pushing the child on a swing or blowing up a balloon. Repeated opportunities with the same predictable words will allow the child an opportunity to jump in and say the words he expects to come next.

The next few pages are filled with the verbal routines I use in speech therapy sessions with several of my favorite toys. The words for the verbal routines are listed on the left while the actions with the toy are listed on the right.

### The Phlat Ball

*"Ball. Oooh... Ball!"* Show the child the ball.

*Push!* Push the Phlat ball flat.

*Wait - Wait - Wait!* Pat both legs with both hands since this gives a child something to do rather than grabbing the ball.

*Pop!"* Hold your hands up as if you're surprised when the Phlat ball pops open.

### 1, 2, 3, JUMP - DOWN!

When a child is about to jump down from anywhere or if you're making a toy jump, say,

*"1.... 2..... 3...."* If the child is getting ready to jump, bend your legs as you say each number. If it's a toy, move the toy up and down for each number.

*"Jump"* Exaggerate your vowel by saying, "Juuuuuuuump!"

*"Down!"* As the child or toy lands, say, "Doooooown!"

### Knock, Knock, Knock - Open!

When a toy has a door that must be opened, knock saying,

*"Knock, knock, knock!"* Knock on the door.

*Who is it?"* Put one hand on each side of your mouth as you call, "Who is it?"

*Open!"* Sign open.

### Calling Routine

Place both hands on each side of your mouth as you "call" the person, character, or toy's name. For example:

*"Elmo! Where are you? Boo!"*

### Walk, Walk, Walk! Stop!

When a child is walking, or if a child is playing with a character/animal, say,

*"Walk, walk, walk!"* Move character as if it's walking.

*"Stop!"* Say "Stop" suddenly and loudly as character stops.

### Oh no! It's stuck! Pull!

When a toy is stuck say,

*"Oh no!"* Place hands on your cheeks.

*"It's stuck!"* Sign *stuck* by placing two fingers on your neck.

*"Pull, pull, pull!"* Use an exaggerated gesture to free the toy.

### Up Up Up! Wheel!

When a character is climbing the ladder to the slide or a vehicle is going up a ramp, say,

*"Up, up, up!"* Make the character climb the ladder or the car drive up the ramp.

*"Whee!"* Say, "Whee!" as the object goes down the slide or the ramp.

### Animals on the Farm

Hold a farm animal toy and sing,

*Cows on the farm say, "Moo, moo, moo.*

*Moo, moo, moo. Moo, moo, moo."*

*Cows on the farm say, "Moo, moo, moo,"*

*All through the farm.*

Sing this song any time the child sees a cow, whether the cow is a picture in a farm animal book, a piece in the farm puzzle, or is a character on his pajamas. Expand the song to include other animals and their sounds.

### Walking, Walking

*Walking, walking, walking, walking. Hop, hop, hop. Hop, hop, hop.*

*Running, running, running. Running, running, running. Now we stop!*

Additional songs and play routines can be found in *Teach Me To Play WITH You* and *Teach Me To Talk: The Therapy Manual* from [teachmetotalk.com](http://teachmetotalk.com).



## TROUBLESHOOTING TIPS FOR VERBAL ROUTINES

If a child isn't responding to verbal routines, here are some suggestions that may make it easier:

- Remember that it takes time to establish a verbal routine. Say the same words and lines over and over many times before you expect a child to recognize, remember, and then join in the verbal routine.
- Sometimes changing the pace of your verbal routines can make it much more likely that a child will join in and verbalize. For some children, this means being even more animated and anticipatory with your body language and facial expressions. Pick up the pace a little so that the child becomes more excited. Increase your own intensity level and a child may rev up enough to begin to pop out real words during your verbal routines. For other children, you may need to slow down the routines. It could be that in an effort to be more animated, your own presentation pace has become too fast. Purposefully reduce your speaking rate while staying emotionally "on" and fun. Keep your energy level up, but slow down and pause for longer periods of time as you're saying the words to your verbal routines.
- Reduce the number of verbal routines that you're using. Focus on just a couple of verbal routines and repeatedly work those into your interactions.
- Simplify the verbal routine. Sometimes a child's language comprehension or language processing system can't process all of the words in a long verbal routine. This is often the case if a child seems to shut down or leave you during an activity you think he would enjoy. Reduce the number of key words and shorten the length of the verbal routine.
- One final word of caution about implementing verbal routines: Make sure that a child isn't just imitating words within verbal routines without other strong evidence of language comprehension. Saying words without understanding what the words mean is called "echolalia." I'd much rather a child be less verbal and understand more words than talk with minimal progress in receptive language. Some children, especially toddlers on the autism spectrum, do seem to have to say words before they begin to understand what they mean, but be extremely careful that your strategies with verbal routines are supporting functional gains in language comprehension and not just rote memorization and imitation of the words in a verbal routine without understanding.

Creating your own Verbal Routines may take some mental discipline to get started, but once you do, the words will become automatic to you, and you'll launch into your verbal routine without much thought. I hope you're also amazed to see a child begin to do the same thing, improving both their receptive and expressive language skills.

Verbal routines work! Building on what our brains expect to hear can be very, very powerful for late talkers!



## RESOURCES AND REFERENCES

The following books and websites can be a great resource for background information for parents or therapists who want to learn more about developing verbal routines:

Hamaguchi, P. (2010). *Childhood speech, language, and listening problems*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons.

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