

OWL to Let Your Child Lead

Letting your child lead begins with OWL:

Observe

Wait

Listen



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

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



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.