



## Parents' Corner

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### Developing Language Skills: Moving Beyond Wants and Needs

by Robin Hurd



Recently, a parent asked me what to do for her son, who is using his AAC device to let people know his wants or needs. His mom knows he's ready to say more, but wondered what to work on next. Coupled with this question was another really, really good one: how do normally speaking kids learn to use words?

Both of these questions together can set the stage for getting a game plan to help our children build language skills. In this article, we'll take a good look at how normally speaking children learn to use words, and we'll map out some next steps for kids who are able to communicate their wants and needs, but are ready for more.

#### How Normally Speaking Kids Learn to use their Words:

Much research has been done on the way normally speaking children learn to use words. As all of us know, toddlers begin using words in a different way than adults. They start with one or two word phrases, and build up. But they also build their vocabularies in a predictable way. Brown's Stages of Language Development is one of the classic bits of research that explains this predictable way of building skills with words.



Children who are just learning to use words begin by combining two words, "more juice", at around the age of 15-30 months. Brown calls this Stage I. Shortly after this, children begin to use the "ing" form of verbs, "I going". In addition to this, they begin to use "in" and "on" and plural endings. Brown calls this Stage II, which happens about 28 to 36 months of age.

Knowing that the next thing speaking children learn to do after they are putting two words together is to use "ing" verbs and "in" and "on" can help us a great deal. If our children are putting two words together, then the next developmental thing they should be ready for is "ing" verbs. Too often, though, we don't target this, leaving gaps in their language development. So we have children with scattered skills. They may be doing things that happen in Brown's Stages II to V, but still not be using those Stage II "ing" verbs.

#### Why Kids who use AAC may have Scattered Skills:

Kids who use AAC may have scattered skills for a variety of reasons. First of all, unlike children who speak, the vocabulary of kids who use AAC is determined by what is on their AAC device. If the words aren't on there, a child who can't spell can't use them. Secondly, even if the word is stored on the AAC device, it's highly likely that no one has taught the child where it is or when it might be useful. Without that information, a child has to rely on stumbling across a word by chance, right at the time when he is in a situation where it might be useful to know that word. Our children who use AAC do learn an amazing amount that way, but providing exposure to important word groups and practical ways to use them can speed up the learning

process.

Below you will find a chart of Brown's stages and some examples of what a child may say at each stage. This chart is from a larger article on language development and AAC from Gail Van Tatenhove. See the references for more information.

### Stage 1 –V Grammatical Structures

Brown's Stage	Age in months	MLU-M	MLU-M range	Morphological Structure	Examples
Stage 1	15-30	1.75	1.5 – 2.0	combine basic words	that car more juice give it
Stage II	28 – 36	2.25	2.0 – 2.5	Present progressive (-ing endings on verbs)	it <b>going</b> falling off
				in	<b>in</b> box
				on	<b>on</b> tree
				-s plurals (regular plurals)	my <b>cars</b>
Stage III	36-42	2.75	2.5 – 3.0	irregular past tense	me <b>fell</b> down you <b>sat</b> on
				-s possessives	doggie's bone
				uncontractible copula (the full form of the verb "to be" when it is the only verb in a sentence)	Are they there? Is she coming?
Stage IV	40 – 46	3.5	3.0 – 3.7	articles	a book the book
				regular past tense (-ed endings on verbs)	she jumped he laughed
				third person regular present tense	he swims she goes
Stage V	42-52+	4.0	3.7 – 4.5	third person irregular	she has he does
				uncontractible auxiliary (the full form of the verb "to be" when it is an auxiliary verb in a sentence)	<b>Are</b> they swimming. <b>Is</b> she going?
				contractible copula (the shortened form of the verb "to be" when it is the only verb in a sentence)	She's ready. They're here. I'm here.
				contractible auxiliary (the shortened form of the verb "to be" when it is an auxiliary verb in a sentence)	They're coming. He's going. I'm done.

#### Why do we Care how Speaking Kids Learn to use Words?

Our brains are wired to learn languages in a certain way. There is no evidence to suggest that lack of ability to produce speech with your mouth indicates a need for the brain to learn language differently. Eventually, those gaps in language development will affect our children. Not only will their communication abilities be affected, but their ability to read and understand books will be affected by their language gaps. It is important that we do what we can to identify and fill in those gaps in language development.



My sister also has a daughter the same age as my middle son. A visit to her house when both kids were toddlers revealed that my sister had a chart of developmental stages hanging on her refrigerator!!! Every so often, she'd check the chart to make sure her daughter was developing properly. She also, by the way, checked her chart to make sure my son was

OK 😊. At the time, her concern with this seemed funny. The family teases her about being so uptight about things like this. Now, though, I am beginning to wonder if it would be helpful to me to hang a chart of Brown's Stages of Language Development in the house, so that everyone who works with the twins could see where the gaps are. Perhaps it would be a good reminder of what needs additional focus.

#### **An Example of Practical Ideas for Stage II ---“ing” Words:**

When I look at Brown's Stage II and realize that my children aren't using “ing” verbs and that we really haven't actively taught them, it gives me direction for something I can teach the boys, to help them build a solid base of language skills. Let's take “ing” words as an example of a missing skill we can pull from Brown's stages of language development and intentionally teach our kids.



So how do we focus on “ing” words in real life settings? Here are some teaching ideas that will help to fill in the gaps for kids at a variety of levels of skills, but who all need some extra practice with these words.

We can begin by modeling “ing” words. “Eating spaghetti! Going up!” Soon after we begin to model those words, we can support our kids to make simple two word phrases using “ing” verbs. “Going up!” “Coming down!”. These words are great fun in an elevator or escalator, but also are great when building with blocks—and of course, crashing them down. 😊 We can also talk about other daily events. “Eating pizza.” “Drinking milk.” “Washing hair.” We are using these words in the same simple ways that children who are learning to speak first use them: to describe or to request an activity.

If we see that our kids already know how to use pronouns (I, you, he, she, etc), we can tie “ing” words to a pronoun. This connects our missing skill with a skill they already have. I like to have funny photos of people doing things and ask for description. “ He is riding on dad!” “She is riding in airplane”. Notice that all of a sudden, those other Stage II words, “in” and “on” have entered the scene. It makes good sense to begin to use these words to say more, so you can see why they would appear at about the same stage in language development.

For children who understand that things happen at different times (now, later, yesterday), we can also combine the use of “ing” words and pronouns with the word “was” to help them talk about things that happened in the past. For example, “What happened in to the boy in the story? He was playing.” Learning to use “was” along with the “ing” verb can be a great help in re-telling a story, whether the story is something that the child read in a book or something that happened to her in the past.

#### **Conclusion:**

We can use information on how speaking children develop language skills to give us a pattern for language development in our children, even though our children speak using AAC. Walking through how to focus on “ing” words for a child with skills at a variety of levels provides an example of how the stages of language development can be supported in a child who uses AAC. When missing skills are noted, similar techniques can be used to help those missing skills to develop.

#### **References:**

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