

How to Use Play-Dough to Encourage Language Skills

Play-dough is a very versatile toy. You can use play-dough to address many different skills. You can use a lot of different accessories with play-dough, including scissors, rolling pins, and cookie cutters. You can find cookie cutters in many different shapes to match your child's interests such as animals, vehicles, or holiday shapes.

Ideas for beginning social skills:

- Imitation of actions- Encourage your child to imitate your actions while playing with play-dough. You can make a ball or a snake and then ask your child to make the same thing. You could also roll out the play-dough and use a cookie cutter to make a certain shape, then see if your child will imitate you. If your child imitates basic actions, get creative and see if your child will imitate making a play-dough pizza or bowls of ice cream.
- Pointing to make a choice- Hold up two different colors of play-dough or two different cookie cutters and ask your child which one he/she wants. You may have model pointing for your child or take your child's hand and help move his/her fingers into a pointing position.
- Turn-taking- Take turns stacking balls of play-dough into a tower or using a favorite play-dough tool. For example, if your child enjoys rolling play-dough, you could roll out your play-dough first and then prompt your child to say "my turn."

Ideas for receptive language skills:

- Practice following a recipe- Make your own play-dough! You can find many different play-dough recipes online. Give your child directions, such as "pour the salt in the bowl" or "stir the play-dough with your spoon." See if your child can understand the verbal directions without gestures and without you showing him/her what to do.
- Understanding action words- Give your child directions that contain action words like "squeeze," "roll," "smash," "cut," "twist," "put in" and "take out." For example, you could say "roll out your play-dough" or "smash your play-dough ball."
- Receptive vocabulary- Use cookie cutters to make a variety of different play-dough shapes and then ask your child to find specific shapes. You could make play-dough cut outs in the shape of different vehicles and then ask your child to "find the bus" or "show me the train."
- Understanding size words- You can make two different sized play-dough balls and then ask your child to "find the big ball" and "find the little ball." You can also practice understanding the words "long" and "short" by making two different snakes. Or, you could make a "tall" tower and a "short" tower.

- Understanding position words- Get some play-dough and some cups or bowls. Give your child directions that contain position words. For example, “make a play-dough ball and put it under the cup” or “make a snake and put it on top of the bowl.”

Ideas for expressive language skills:

- Have your child ask for more play-dough, tools, or cookie cutters
 - If your child is using sign language, have him/her sign “more” or sign the names of colors to ask for a certain color of play-dough. If your child uses picture symbols, have your child point to a picture of the desired play-dough tool or to the desired color of play-dough.
 - If your child is beginning to use words, have him/her imitate the name of the desired tool such as “scissors” or “car.” You could also have your child imitate the name for the color of play-dough that he/she wants.
 - If your child is beginning to put sentences together, prompt him/her to say “I want _____” or “give me _____ please.”
- Action word vocabulary- Practice using a variety of different action words to describe your actions while playing with the play-dough. You can use words like “smash,” “roll,” “cut,” “twist,” “push,” “squeeze,” “put in” and “take out.” Prompt your child to imitate the action words.
- Using size words- Practice using size words like “big,” “little,” “long,” “short,” and “tall” Make two play-dough shapes that are different sizes and then ask your child which one he/she wants. Prompt your child to say “I want the big car” or “I want the tall tower.”
- Practice answering questions- Use a cookie cutter to make a shape with your play-dough and then hide the shape under a bowl, cloth, or sheet of paper. Ask your child questions to help him/her guess what play-dough shape you made. For example, if you made an airplane, you could ask your child “what is something that can fly.” If your child guesses a bird or something else that flies, you could give him/her another clue like “what is something that people can ride in?”
- Asking questions- Let your child use a cookie cutter to make a shape and then hide it. Prompt your child to ask you questions about the shape to help you guess what he/she made.