Jackson’s big brown eyes looked upwards searching his dad’s face for attention. He thrust both arms upwards. Jackson’s dad immediately interpreted his son’s gesture correctly. “You want up?” asked his dad, lifting Jackson into his arms.

Jackson, who is two, smiled but didn’t say a word. His parents describe Jackson as a late talker. They aren’t sure if his slowness to use speech is a problem, and have contacted their local preschool speech and language program for advice.

At Hanen Early Language Program late talkers are described as children who at:

- 18-20 months use less than 24 words
- 21-24 months use less than 40 words
- 24-30 months use less than 100 words/or have limited two-word combinations

It can be hard to tell if late talkers will go on to have speech difficulties. Researchers and clinicians, however, are beginning to understand that gestures play a role in children’s expressive language skills. We now know that late talkers who also experience language difficulties use fewer and less varied gestures than other children. As well, the number of different meaningful gestures children use at 18 months of age predicts their vocabulary at 42 months.

Babies use body language to communicate their needs and emotions. They cry when hungry or wet, stiffen their bodies when frustrated, and smile when happy. Somewhere around 7 to 9 months of age, infants begin to use contact gestures such as pulling on a parent’s hand or pant leg to say “come”. They also start to create shared attention with others through pointing – prompting us to label objects and explain ideas.

Jillian is learning single words. As she and her mom play, Jillian points to her doll’s face. “Eye,” says Jillian. Her mom nods and says, “Yes, eye.” Jillian continues, “Nose.” Again Jillian’s mom affirms Jillian’s word choice. Then Jillian says something that her mom cannot decipher. Jillian tries again, simultaneously raising and flapping her arm. “Oh, arm!” says Jillian’s mom, imitating Jillian’s moving arm. “Yes, that’s an arm.” Jillian has used a complementary gesture - an action that showed the meaning of the word she could not yet clearly say.

Supplementary gestures occur when children combine two different ideas using a word and gesture. For example, Jillian says “juice” while shaking her head. With a word and gesture she combines the ideas of ‘juice’ and ‘no’ to communicate “I don’t want juice.” Researchers tell us that the number of gesture and speech combinations children use at 18 months predicts the complexity of sentences they will use at 42 months.
So how does knowing about gestures help parents and caregivers support their child’s language development? Adults can use gestures to clarify, affirm and support children’s communication efforts.

- Use meaningful gestures as you speak. For a baby who is fussing, you might say, “Are you hungry?” while rubbing your tummy. This shows your baby a gesture for a word they aren’t yet able to say. For children using complementary and supplementary gestures, imitate the gestures they have initiated as you speak the word or phrase aloud. This lets children know their gestures are understood and they can use them again successfully.
- Give children time to make sense of your gestures. Hold your gesture for the duration of your sentence. For example, pour the juice while you say “I’m pouring juice” rather than pouring first and then speaking. Or continue pointing to a dog entering the room as you say, “Here comes the dog.”
- It often takes three months from the time a child initiates a gesture until he or she can say the word. Because of this, it’s important for adults to label the word specifically and consistently. Rather than, “Oh, I see!” when a child points, label the precise object the child is pointing to. This lets the child hear the word they want to say clearly and repeatedly.
- Sing and say lots of songs and rhymes with gestures. Children learn the meaning of new words more easily when they are combined with actions. Even infants can participate in familiar songs and rhymes like *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* when they can join in using simple gestures.

Babies are born with an instinctual need to communicate. Gestures are how children talk before they can speak. Gestures can also be a tool parents use to help their children develop the language skills they need.
