

How to Use Puzzles to Encourage Language Skills

Puzzles are great for language enrichment because you can do so many different activities with them. Also, they are inexpensive and you can find puzzles of many different difficulty levels. Puzzles also come in a wide variety of different themes, like farm animals, vehicles, super heroes, so you can work on many different vocabulary words. These ideas will work best with the inset puzzles where each piece is a cut-out of a specific shape or picture. I'm going to use a farm themed puzzle for my examples, but you can choose any puzzle that will interest your child.

Ideas for beginning social skills:

- Joint attention- Hide a puzzle piece under a blanket, cup, or bowl and say "Where is (name of piece)" like "Where is the cow?" Encourage your child to say "here it is" or "I got it" when he/she finds the piece. You can get out 2 different cups or bowls and hide a puzzle piece under one of them so that your child has to point to guess which bowl the piece is under. You could also let your child watch you put the piece under one bowl and then move the bowls around a couple times. This way, the child has to watch and pay attention to the bowls to find the piece. After your child finds the piece, let your child put it in the puzzle and repeat the game with the next piece.
- Turn taking- Take all the pieces out of the puzzle and put them in a pile. Prompt your child to say "my turn" and choose a piece to put in the puzzle. Then you say "my turn" and put in a puzzle piece. Continue taking turns until the puzzle is completed. At first, you may have to hold your child's hand back to help him/her wait for you to take your turn. You could also get a picture that represents "me" or "my turn." Hand the picture to your child when it's his/her turn and prompt him/her to give the picture back to you when it's your turn.

Ideas for receptive language:

- Receptive vocabulary- Line up puzzle pieces across the room or at the end of a hallway. Make sure your child has room to move. Sit at the opposite end of the hallway or room with your child and tell him/her which piece to go get. Make it fun by using different actions. For example, you could say "jump down the hallway to get the horse" or "take giant steps to get the chicken." You can use jumping, running, skipping, dancing, slow steps, big step, little steps, or any other action. Have the child bring back the puzzle piece and put it in the puzzle.
 - You could also sit at a table and lay all the puzzle pieces out on the table. Then, tell your child which piece to put in the puzzle. For example, you could say "find the duck."

- Understanding position words- Hide puzzle pieces around your house and tell your child where he/she can find a certain piece. For example, say “The cow is under the couch.” Your child has to follow the direction to find the piece and then bring it back and put it in the puzzle. Use position words such as “in, on, under, behind, between, beside, when describing where the pieces are hiding. You can give your child a paper towel tube to use as a telescope to make looking for pieces even more fun.
 - You can also give your child directions and let him/her hide the puzzle pieces. Describe where you want the child to hide the piece using position words, like “go put the horse behind the chair.” Then you can have another parent or sibling hunt for the pieces.
- Identifying objects by attributes- Lay out all the puzzle pieces and describe a piece to your child. For example, you could say “get the animal that likes to play in the mud” or “get the animal that can lay eggs.” After your child finds the right piece, let him/her put it in the puzzle.

Ideas for expressive language

- Have your child ask for a puzzle piece using phrases that are appropriate for his/her language level
 - If your child is using sign language, have him/her sign “more” or sign the specific name of the puzzle piece. For a farm puzzle, your child could sign the name of each animal. You could also use picture symbols. Have your child point to a picture that represents a puzzle piece or “more.”
 - If your child is beginning to use words, prompt him/her to say “more” or “piece” to get another puzzle piece. You could also have your child say the name of each specific puzzle piece.
 - If your child is using 2-3 word phrases, prompt him/her to say “I want _____” or “put in _____”
- Expressive vocabulary- Work on vocabulary by naming the objects or animals on the puzzle pieces. You can have your child name the pieces as he/she completes the puzzle. If your child doesn’t know the name of the object or animal on each piece, encourage him/her to imitate the name after you say it. You can also ask your child to tell you which piece you should put into the puzzle when it’s your turn.
- Using position words- Let your child hide puzzle pieces around the room. Have your child use position words such as “in, on, under, or behind” to tell you where the pieces are hiding. You can look in the incorrect places sometimes so that your child has to help you. For example, if your child says a piece is under the table, you could look on top of the table and then wait for your child to say something like “no, it’s *under*.”