

Flexible languaging games for parent and child

Flexible languaging means being able to use language well—with intelligence and creativity—while also holding language ‘lightly’. That is, while being clear on the limits of language and the difference between language and material reality. Flexible languaging means we can compare, pretend, and problem solve and recognise when to stop doing these things and simply be in the moment or to learn from our direct experience instead.

Fortunately, the kinds of games and nonsense that many children delight in can be used to play with flexible languaging. There really is no limit to the kinds of fun silly games that parents, and children can play. So, experiment and have fun!

Here are some ideas to get you started:

- Rhubarb – take turns trying to get a point across when you can only say the word ‘rhubarb’. For example, with gestures and pointing and saying the word ‘rhubarb’ over and over you ask if your child wants a piece of toast.
- What is this? – take turns explaining what a common household object is with demonstrations. You can say it is anything except what it actually is. If you like you can pretend to be a salesperson trying to sell it. For example, your child tries to sell you a toothbrush as a multi-purpose device good for brushing small animals and cleaning china.
- Opposites - say the opposite of what you mean. Try to have a whole conversation while saying the opposite of what you actually mean. For example, you are hungry so you say ‘I am not hungry.’
- Don’t say yes or no - one person asks yes or no questions that the other person needs to reply to truthfully without saying the words yes or no. For example, you ask your child ‘do you like sport?’ and they answer, ‘a lot’.
- Saying silly things – each person takes turns at saying things that aren’t true, the more outlandish the better. For example, you say, ‘the sky is bright red!’ Once this is an established and fun game you might like to slip in an occasional psychologically meaningful ‘silly thing’. For example, you might say, ‘I don’t like you’ with an exaggerated expression to show it is another ‘silly thing’. This should be done with care. Only continue if your child is taking it lightly as a ‘silly thing’z
- Say one thing, do another – say you are doing something while doing something else. For example, you could say you are sitting down while you are running on the spot. You can also play a variant of the game where you say that you don’t want to do the very thing that you are doing or even that you say you can’t do the very thing that you are doing. Once this is established, this game can be used to support your child to approach situations that your child is fearful of or don’t want to approach. For example, your child might say ‘I don’t want to jump into the pool’ while jumping into a pool.
- Word salad – create a story with a selection of random words. You can put random words into a hat and draw them out to start the game, or just take turns suggesting random words until you have a list. Once you have the list, try to quickly come up with a little story. Just say the story to yourselves out aloud. Just a few sentences is fine. For older children you can try to get every word into just one sentence. For example, ‘The prince rode the motorbike he bought from the frog at the haunted house all the way to the village to get some ice-cream’. Once established, you could add psychologically meaningful words to the list, for example, ‘bully’ or ‘worry’.

