

**Importance of Imitation Skills in Young Children**

**Shilpa Sankhla**

Occupational therapist

**Ria Jose**

Speech and Language Pathologist

Imitation means copying someone. Imitation can be motor, gestural, oral or verbal. Imitation skills are important for a child's development in the areas of learning motor skills, social rules and undoubtedly language & social communication.

Mutual imitation is the first form of motor imitation that develops very early in life. For example, at 3-4 months of age, when the parent smiles at the child, s/he smiles back. At 6-8 months of age, when the mother claps for the child to appreciate him for something that he did, he attempts the same. Imitation helps children to relate to their environment and people in this environment. It also helps them to understand their bodies and move their body effectively in situations.

Research has shown that if the parent imitates child's movements during the first few months of life, the child will learn to follow the parents. A child is ready for motor imitation games when s/he is moving their arms/hands independently during feeding and playing – For example, holding feeding bottle, exploring toys by mouth, etc).

Another example: You say- "How big is papa?", then raise your arms over your head and say- "this big". Then encourage the same saying- "How big is \_\_\_\_\_ (Child's name)?" while helping the child to initiate the movement. Gradually, your child will be able to imitate this movement on his/her own.

In the present times, due to over- exposure to technology and screens, children fail to develop imitation skills naturally because they do not get opportunities to observe things/adults/peers around them in their environment, as a result of which some important functional skills like self-feeding, toileting, communication, etc. develop late or do not develop at all. For this reason, parents must ensure that they interact with their children and encourage mutually engaging activities as much as possible during the early years of development.

Imitation skills can be encouraged very early **in music and rhymes**—Twinkle twinkle, Wheels on the bus, If you're happy and you know it, Finger family, Incy-wincy spider, Where is thumbkin?, Shake and move, Wiggle it, etc.

Imitation **in pretend play**—brushing teeth, combing hair, cooking food, rolling out chapatis, talking on the phone, playing a piano, reading a book, turning pages, feeding a doll, drinking from a glass/cup, carrying a heavy bucket/bag, touching something hot, washing dirty hands, etc.

Songs/Rhymes that can **encourage verbal imitation**—5 little speckled frogs, Old Mac Donald, Laugh and chuckle and giggle (Cocomelon), Johnny Johnny, Sneezing song, Baby sick song, Wheels on the bus, Phonics songs, Roar like a lion, etc.

**Imitation in daily life activities**—clapping hands for work well done, waving hands for hi/bye, puff up your cheeks and popping, saying 'vroom-vroom' while playing with toy car, imitating environmental sounds such as the "shhhhh" of the pressure cooker, the "ting-tong" of the door-bell, the "beep-beep" of the car horn or the microwave oven; animal sounds/vehicle sounds, human sounds- cough, sneeze etc.

**Resources:**

1. Patty Shukla songs -- encourages imitation and movement through fun and music.

<https://pattyshuklakidsmusic.com/>

2. Com DEALL 'Fun with Movement' is a Communicaid developed to build motor imitation skills.

[www.communicaids.com](http://www.communicaids.com).

**References:**

1. Ingersoll, B. (2008). The Social Role of Imitation in Autism: Implications for the Treatment of Imitation Deficits. *Infants & Young Children*, 21(2), 107–119.
2. Ingersoll, B. (2012). Brief Report: Effect of a Focused Imitation Intervention on Social Functioning in Children with Autism. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 42:1768–1773.
3. Ingersoll, B. & Schreibman, L. (2006). Teaching Reciprocal Imitation Skills to Young Children with Autism Using a Naturalistic Behavioral Approach: Effects on Language, Pretend Play, and Joint Attention. *Journal of Autism and Developmental Disorders*, 36(4), 487-502.
4. Marton, K. (2009). Imitation of body postures and hand movements in children with specific language impairment. *J Exp Child Psychol*, 102(1), 1-13.
5. Sussman, F. & Weitzman, E. (2014). *Take out the Toys: Building Early Toy Play for Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder and Other Social Communication Difficulties*. Toronto, ON: The Hanen Centre.