TURNING PAGES,
BUILDING FUTURES

LEARNING WHERE LIFE HAPPENS

The Copying Game

What to try when your child doesn't copy you (yet).

Short on time? Jump to page 3 for the one-page Copycat Planner.

Start Here

This resource is for children who have not yet begun to imitate—whether by echoing sounds, copying actions, or repeating gestures—and for parents who have been told that imitation supports language and play but not shown how to encourage it. Here's what often goes unsaid: before children can copy us, they need to experience what copying looks like. So, you make the first move. You go first.

The big idea: Imitation goes both ways. You copy them first - then they copy you.

When you copy a young child's play - faithfully, without taking over - three things happen at once. Your child sees their own ideas reflected back, which makes those ideas worth repeating. You become the most interesting thing in the room without moving your child's attention anywhere. And the game that develops is one turn after another - the same back-and-forth that conversation and social play are built on. Copying is a teaching tool that doesn't need a single instruction.

Try This: Six ways to make copying a game you both play

Go first: copy their play

Try: Whatever your child does with their hands, do it too - right beside them, at their pace. If they stack cups, you stack cups. If they line up cars, you line up cars. Place the next car in their lineup or make your own line. Use their toy or an identical set of your own, whichever they'll allow.

Copy the sounds too

Try: Sound effects, car noises, babble, half-songs - they all count. If your child says "vroom vroom," you say "vroom vroom". Echo their sounds several times in a row and try to get them to echo back. This back and forth is the foundation for communication. Be animated to get their attention. Vocal copying often opens the door to first words, because sounds are the easiest to trade.

Say what you see

Try: While you copy, describe - short phrases, no questions. Add simple descriptors like color, shape, or size. Count items as they are used. Add sound effects. "Stack, stack, CRASH." "Ball in." Your words ride along with your child's own actions, which is where language sticks best.

Pause for the look

Try: After a copy, stop and wait. The glance your child gives you - even a quick one - is them checking whether the game continues. That look is the whole point, and your stillness is what invites it.

Add one small thing

Try: Once the copying game is rolling, change your copy just slightly. Tap, tap, tap becomes tap, tap, tap... roll. One small addition, not a new activity. You're showing your child what happens next in play - while their idea is still the headline.

Flip the turn

Try: Now and then, do your action and then hold still - hands paused, eyebrows up - a beat longer than feels natural. You're giving your child the chance to be the one who copies. If nothing comes, no problem: go back to copying them and try the flip again another day.

Keep it short and keep it fun - a few minutes inside a routine your child already enjoys beats a long session any day. Copying comes first; your child's turn to copy you comes second.

What to look for

You don't need to collect formal data to notice whether something is helping. Over a week or two, watch for:

- ☐ Your child watching you when you copy them
- ☐ Laughing, smiling, or moving closer when the copying game starts
- ☐ Handing you a toy, or offering you a turn
- ☐ Copying an action or sound of yours back - even a small piece of it
- ☐ Pausing or looking at you when it's "your turn"

One small change is information - and a place to build from.

If it doesn't work...

If the copying game isn't catching yet, that is not a verdict on your child - it is information. Try:

- If sharing their toys sparks protest, don't share - keep an identical set of your own and let them keep theirs
- If your child doesn't seem to notice your copying, turn up the drama: bigger motions, sillier sounds, slower rhythm
- If you pause and nothing comes, gently guide their hands through your action once, then go straight back to copying them
- If your child only tolerates the game for a few seconds, it's ok. It's the repetition that does the teaching.
- If sounds are hard for your child, start with actions only - sounds can join later
- If copying hasn't budged after a few weeks of daily games, that's useful information - bring it to your next consultation

Remember: *Before children copy us, they need to see what copying looks like. Going first isn't a detour from teaching imitation - it is where it starts.*

Want more practical ideas?

Get practical, doable strategies for teaching your own child at home - what to try next, how to break it down, and how to make it fit your family's routines. Explore PAGE Resources → Or, if you'd like occasional practical ideas delivered by email, **join the PAGE list at pageaba.com.**

Need help figuring out what to try?

Every child is different. If you're trying strategies at home and aren't sure what to change, PAGE can help you identify practical, individualized ways to support learning, communication, participation, and independence in everyday life. **Learn more or schedule a consultation at pageaba.com.**

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The Copycat Planner

Pick ONE action or sound your child already makes. Copy it. Add one small thing. Wait, and notice what happens.

One play action or sound my child already does:

How I'll copy it (circle one to start):

- **Copy their play with an identical set of my own**
- **Share their toy and take turns with it**
- **Copy their sounds, car noises, and babble back**
- **Copy what they do, then pause and wait**
- **Add one small thing to my copy**

What happened when I waited for their turn:

This is a note to yourself, not a worksheet anyone will grade.

Go first. Copy. Add one small thing. Wait.