

## What Are Carrier Phrases and How Do I Use Them?

If you don't live in the world of speech-therapy, you probably aren't familiar with the term "carrier phrase." Luckily, it's very simple one to understand. When we speechies talk about carrier phrases, we are referring to phrases in which the first few words stay the same and only the last word changes. Some of my favorite carrier phrases are:

*I want a...*  
*I found a...*  
*I have a....*  
*I see a....*  
*Do you have a....?*  
*Where is the....?*

Carrier phrases can be a great way to help children learn to use longer sentences. And, as a bonus, they can be used to help with lots of other speech and language skills as well. Carrier phrases work well because they can be used repetitively in an activity, giving children multiple opportunities to learn the phrase.

For example, if I am looking at books with a child, I might model the phrases, "I see a ball!" "I see a fish!" "I see a plane!" and then wait. Often, the child will come back with, "I see a (new noun here)." This teaches the child that exchanging one word in a sentence changes the meaning of the sentence, but because the first few words of the sentence are the same, it's easier for children to memorize and say the whole thing. This can, however, be a good and bad thing. It's good because using carrier phrases can lead to children using longer sentences quickly. Many children with autism, for example, are taught to use "I want (+ noun)" to request things and are able to learn this pretty fast. The downfall, though, is that sometimes children become over reliant on using these carrier phrases and don't learn to make up all kinds of new and creative sentences. Carrier phrases can be good as a first step for learning to create sentences, but I always make sure children are using lots of different types of [2-word phrases](#) as well.

Carrier phrases are also great for other language skills. For example:

- Carrier phrase can be used with children who are working on producing new [speech sounds](#) (i.e., articulation). Often, children can produce a sound well when producing it in one word at a time, but they have difficulty producing it in sentences or conversation. Carrier phrases are a great in-between step, because they increase the sentence length, but "reduce the linguistic load" (in other words, they don't require kids to think as much about what they are going to say before they say it). This can be especially helpful for children with developmental apraxia of speech.
- Carrier phrases are also great when working with children who are stuttering. In my post on preschool stuttering, I gave lots of beginning suggestions for working with a [preschooler who stutters](#). One of those steps is to use slow and simple speech (again with the idea of "reducing the linguistic and cognitive load"—or helping children speak in activities that are predictable and thus require a bit less complex

language and a bit less thought about what they are going to say). Doing this helps increase fluency. Using carrier phrases can be a great way to slow down an activity, take turns, and use simple, repetitive speech to increase fluency.

How to use carrier phrases?

- Use [expansion](#) to model the phrase for your child in an appropriate activity. Say, for example, you were having snack and your child kept asking for “cookie” by just using that one word. Each time he did this, you might say, “I want a cookie,” before you give him the cookie and wait just a bit to see if he imitates you.
- Read books that have carrier phrases embedded in them. One of my favorites is [Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?](#) by Eric Carle.
- Play games like Memory and Go Fish, modeling simple phrase like, “Do you have a (noun)?” and “I found a (noun)” or “I see a (noun)”
- Take turns pointing out interesting things in a book, modeling “I see (noun)” as you go.

### **Top 5 Carrier Phrase Activities for Speech & Language Development**

Carrier phrases are a handy little speech-language therapy trick. We use them any time we want to help someone extend the length of their sentence, but keep the sentence somewhat simple.

As speech-language therapists, we often work to gradually increase the difficulty level of a task. We do this so that we can help an individual stay successful by taking small steps toward their ultimate goal. Say, for example, a child struggles with fluency (or ‘stutters’). We might teach that child certain strategies to stay fluent and then initially practice those strategies at the single word level where it will be relatively easy for him to execute the strategy. As he gains success, we then gradually increase the difficulty level.

Many times, we move from having a child practice a skill at the single word level (“cat”) to having him practice at the two-word phrase level (“big cat”), to having him work at the sentence level (“There’s a big cat!”). However, the jump from phrase level to sentence level is sometimes a bit too big. Why? Because it requires a person to *think* of a sentence that makes sense. This increased pull on cognition significantly increases the complexity of the task, which then sometimes results in a backslide in progress. The solution? **Carrier phrases.**

As I explained in the post [What are Carrier Phrases and How Do I Use Them?](#), carrier phrases are those phrases in which the first few words remain the same, and the last one changes. One example is “I see a \_\_\_\_\_,” used during a book activity. The child might label “I see a *horse*,” “I see a *cow*,” “I see a *dog*” and so

on. Because the first few words stay the same, he doesn't have to think of what he is going to say except to change the noun. This leads to a sentence that is longer, creative, and yet linguistically simple.

The use of carrier phrases can be a very important step when working with children who struggle with fluency. Carrier phrases are also really helpful for children with **apraxia of speech** or significant **articulation disorders**, because the speech sounds in the initial part of the sentence stay the same, which allows that part of the sentence to roll off the child's tongue without challenging his motor planning system as much as a totally new sentence would. I also frequently use carrier phrases with children with **autism spectrum disorders** when I am first teaching them to verbalize simple sentences. In this case, I will often use [pictures](#) along with the carrier phrase, so the child can visually see the nouns that are rotated into the carrier phrase. As he does so, he begins to understand that words are building blocks for sentences and can be combined in lots of different ways.

## My Top Five Carrier Phrases (And Activities To Go With Them)

*I found a....*

### Sensory Bin Hide and Find

Most often, I elicit this carrier phrase by hiding objects or pictures inside of sensory bins filled with rice, sand, popcorn or oatmeal. Kids never get tired of digging and finding! Plus, playing in sensory bins seems to carry all kinds of other benefits, as well, as eloquently explained by [teachpreschool.org](http://teachpreschool.org).

When a child pulls something out, I have him say, "I found a....."



*Everyday Sensory Play in  
Preschool*

**Memory**

It's an oldie but a goodie. Lay out matching cards face down, take turns looking for pairs, and then celebrate and say what you found ("I found...") when you find a pair. This is a speech therapy classic for a reason: you can integrate almost any type of picture (and therefore any type of target) into the activity. I also recently found this fun fishy twist on the game, making it even more fun to play:

**The Puzzle Game**

To make puzzles more fun and elicit more language, I often get out two different peg puzzles. Then I dump *all* the pieces into the middle of the table face down and ask the kiddo I'm working with to pick one puzzle. I take the other, and we take turns pulling pieces out of the middle, saying what we found ("I found..."), and putting the pieces into our puzzles. First one to complete their puzzle wins! (And, since it's easy for the adult to tell which pieces are which, it's also easy to let the child win). Sound puzzles are my favorite.

**Clothespin Surprises**

I happened upon this activity from [Chit Chat and Small Talk](#) on Pinterest the other day. It looks easy, fun, and perfect for "I found a ..." carrier phrases!



[chitchatandsmalltalkblogspot.com](http://chitchatandsmalltalkblogspot.com)

*I see a / I spy a....*

### Books

Books are a great way to elicit the "I see/I spy" carrier phrase. You can simply take turns labeling what you see in the book (you say, "I see...." and then wait for your child to take a turn), or you can play the classic "I spy ..." game ("I spy something that is...."). Playing "I spy" brings with it an additional benefit: working on *describing*, a language task that can be difficult for many kiddos with language delays. I usually choose simple picture books with lots of actual photographic pictures on one page when using the book as an activity like this.

### I spy

Speaking of "I spy," this can be an excellent game to play even without books. I play it with my kids anytime I want to pass the time- especially on long car rides or during restaurant waits. I recently also started playing the below "I Spy" game with my eight year old. It's a great "I spy" game because it moves quickly, so it's possible to get lots of "I spy ...." sentences. And, it's a nice game for working on selective attention, too.

### Flashlight Games and Hallway Hunts

Another speechie standby. Tape pictures on a wall and turn out the lights- find the picture by flashlight and say what you see! (I see....) Or, tape the pictures in various places throughout a long hallway and go on a picture hunt. For added fun, grab a paper towel tube and make some binoculars before you head out on your hunt. Either way, have fun shouting what you see as you go!

### I spy bottles and I spy bags

Another great way to play I spy! Hide small objects inside of ride, but avoid the mess of sensory bins by enclosing the rice inside of an I Spy Bag (made in the picture below by [homeadebyjill.blogspot.com](http://homeadebyjill.blogspot.com)). I've also seen this same concept presented in a see-through bottle. Either way, there is lots of time for "I spy" but a lot less mess!



[homeadebyjill.blogspot.com](http://homeadebyjill.blogspot.com)

*I got the...*

### Go Fishing!

In grad school, we flipped a table on its side and put paper fish with paper clips on one side of the table and a child with a magnetic fishing pole on the other. Then, when the child "caught" a fish, we had him tell us what he had caught by saying, "I got the....." The other day, I saw a fun version of this on Pinterest, courtesy of [Pigtails and Tutus](#). Definitely something fun to try out at home on a cold or rainy day!



### Slap Game

This slap game, from [Kindergarten and Mooneyisms](#), was originally designed as a game to enhance sight reading skills. But it got me thinking: with a few simple modifications, it could easily be a speech therapy game. Lay out pictures instead of words, and have a stack of the the same words face down in the middle of the table. Then, turn one card over at a time and race to be the first one to find the matching card and slap it ! Don't forget to say, "I got the .... " to label what you slapped!





Kindergarten and Mooneyisms

*I have a....*

Bingo

Bingo is a super easy activity in which to use "I have a..." carrier phrases, especially if you are using a Picture Bingo game. Every time the child places a bingo chip on her card, she gets to say, "I have a..." and label the picture she just covered.

Go Fish Card Game

Okay, I'm cheating a little bit on this one. When playing the classic Go Fish card game, the carrier phrase you'll most likely use is: "Do you have a....?" Even so, this is a fantastic game for carrier phrases, because you can use any cards you want, as long as you have pairs. This makes it a great game for working on articulation because you can use it with any sound cards you want!

## *I made a....*

### **Playdoh and Cookie Cutters**

Little ones love to roll and squish playdoh. They love it even more when they get to cut out fun shapes with cookie cutters. And, since this is an easy thing to do, they'll want to do it over and over, making it easy to get lots of practice telling you what they made! (I made.....). I pull out play-doh and cookie cutters all the timeto get this carrier phrase.

### **Water painting**

Another simple and yet engaging activity I found on Pinterest, thanks to [moneysavingmom.com](http://moneysavingmom.com). Grab a paintbrush and paint pictures on the sidewalk with water. Just like the playdoh and cookie cutters activity, this is easy and quick enough that kids will end up painting lots of different things, making it easy to get them to say, "I made a...." over and over again.