

Parents Guide – Ages and stages

Our guide to the typical stages of speech and language development in babies, children and young people.

Children develop language at different rates. However, understanding what is typical can help you identify speech and language problems early. You can also find out how to help your child learn to talk and develop their communication skills.

• 0-6 Months

This is a guide to how children develop speech and language between 0-6 months. Children develop skills at different rates but by 6 months, usually children will:

- Turn towards a sound when they hear it
- Be startled by loud noises
- Watch your face when you talk to them
- Recognise your voice
- Smile and laugh when other people smile and laugh
- Make sounds to themselves, like cooing, gurgling and babbling
- Make noises, like coos or squeals, to get your attention
- Have different cries for different needs. For example, one cry for hunger, another when they are tired.

How to support your child

There are lots of things you can do to encourage your child at this stage:

- Copy sounds your baby makes. This will encourage more noises and is the start of turn-taking and conversations
- Hold your baby near your face when you talk to them so that they can see you clearly
- Talk to your baby about what you are doing. This will help them to start to learn words
- Talk in a sing-song voice to your baby. This will keep them interested in what you are saying

- Have some special time with your child each day to play with toys and picture books.

Things to Look Out For

Speech and language skills develop from a very early age. However, some children do not develop the early skills they need.

These can be very difficult to spot from an early age. Here are four examples that would cause concern at 6 months:

- If a baby is not startled by loud noises
- If a baby does not engage in eye contact when spoken to
- If a baby does not smile back at someone smiling at them
- If a baby does not watch a speaker's face with interest.

6-12 Months

Children develop skills at different rates but by their first year, usually children will:

- Listen carefully, and turn to someone talking on the other side of the room
- Look at you when you speak and when their name is called
- Babble strings of sounds, like 'no-no' and 'go-go'
- Make noises, point and look at you to get your attention
- Smile at people who are smiling at them
- Start to understand words like 'bye-bye' and 'up' especially when a gesture is used at the same time
- Recognise the names of familiar objects, things like 'car' and 'daddy'
- Enjoy action songs and rhymes and get excited when sung to
- Take turns in conversations, babbling back to an adult.

How to Support Your Child

There are lots of things you can do to encourage your child at this stage:

- Make different sounds to interest your child. This can be varying the sound of your voice or things like a rattle or squeaky toy.

- Pointing to sounds will help develop your child's listening skills. This will also help develop their awareness of the world around them.
- Encourage your child to look at you during activities. This could be dressing, feeding or nappy changing. This will help your child's attention and communication skills.
- Talk about everyday activities, like getting dressed, eating and bathing.
- Copy your baby when they are babbling. This is a very good way to show how to take turns in communication. This will encourage them to make even more sounds.
- Use actions with words. Try waving as you say 'bye-bye' or picking up their cup as you say 'drink'. This will help your child to relate what they see and do with the words they need.
- Sing action songs and play games like 'peek-a-boo' to encourage communication and attention skills.
- Have some special time with your child each day to play with toys and picture books.

Things to Look Out For

Speech and language skills develop from a very early age. However, some children do not develop the early skills they need.

This can be very difficult to spot from an early age. However, you should talk to a GP or health visitor if your child does not:

- Respond to noises by 9 months
 - Point to things they are interested in by one year
- Try to gain your attention by making noises by one year. This could be through eye contact, facial expressions or reaching.

12-18 Months

Children develop skills at different rates but by 18 months, usually children will:

- Enjoy listening to music and singing, and sometimes move their body to 'dance' along to music
- Enjoy looking at simple picture books together with an adult

- Understand many more words than they can say, including the names of everyday objects like furniture, clothing and body parts
- Understand some simple questions and instructions like 'where's teddy?' and 'kiss Mummy'
- Say up to 20 single words (such as 'cup', 'daddy', 'dog') to ask for things or to comment on what they see, even though they may not be very clear yet
- Use a lot of babble and single words while they are playing, often sounding like they are speaking in sentences even though they aren't always saying real words
- Copy a lot of things that they see adults doing, like saying 'Hello' or waving goodbye
- Enjoy simple pretend play, such as giving dolly a drink or pretending to talk on the phone

How to Support Your Child

There are lots of things you can do to encourage your child at this stage:

- Look at your child when you are talking to them. This is easier to do if you are at the same level, so get down to their eye level or bring them up to yours.
- Talk to your child in short, simple sentences. This helps them to understand what you're saying, and also gives them a better chance of copying a word or two when they're ready.
- Talk about the things your child is looking at or doing. Follow their lead when playing with them and talk about what interests them.
- Repeat words often – children need to hear words many times before they remember them and say them.
- Talk to your child often during daily routines like mealtimes and bath time.
- Repeat back what you think your child means when they don't have the words. For example, if your child points at the biscuit tin and babbles, you could say 'Biscuit? You want a biscuit?'
- Give your child choices between two things to encourage communication. For example, instead of saying, 'What do you want to drink?', you could say, 'Do you want milk or juice?', holding both choices up in front of them.

Things to Look Out For

While all children develop differently, it's worth seeking advice from a professional if your child does not:

- Babble to communicate by 12 – 15 months
- Say their first words by 18 months
- Appear to understand some of what you say to them by 18 months

18-24 Months

This is a guide to how children develop speech and language between 18-24 months.

At this stage, children try out new things and explore the world around them more actively. They will often choose their own activities and may not always like being told what to do.

Children develop skills at different rates but by 2 years, usually children will:

- Concentrate on activities for longer, such as playing with a toy they like
- Sit and listen to simple stories with pictures
- Understand between 200 and 500 words
- Understand more simple questions and instructions. For example, 'where is your shoe?' and 'show me your nose'
- Copy sounds and words a lot
- Use 50 or more single words. These will also become more recognisable to others
- Start to put short sentences together with 2-3 words, such as 'more juice' or 'bye nanny'
- Enjoy pretend play with their toys, such as feeding dolly
- Use a more limited number of sounds in their words than adults – often these sounds are p, b, t, d, m and w. Children will also often miss the ends off words at this stage. They can usually be understood about half of the time.

How to Support Your Child

There are lots of things you can do to encourage children at this stage:

- Talk about everyday activities like putting away the shopping. This helps children to connect language to the world around them. Remember to leave little gaps or pauses so that your child can respond.
- Use objects and gestures to help them understand instructions and questions. It is also useful to give a child two or three options, such as, 'do you want teddy or the car?', 'is this your nose or your foot?'
- Read books together. Looking at the pictures and describing them is just as good as actually reading the story. 'Lift-the-flap' books also help concentration

- Repeat and expand on what a child says. If a child says 'juice' you can say 'more juice', 'juice please' or 'juice gone'. This shows your child how words can be put together to make short sentences
- Children learn speech sounds gradually. It is better to say the whole word back to a child rather than correcting them. It also helps them if they can see your face when you are talking to them. This helps them to watch and copy the movements of your lips
- Children can be frustrated when adults don't understand them. This can lead to tantrums. Encouraging a child to use gestures or actions for objects can help. Try to be patient and wait for them to finish what they are saying or trying to show you.

Things to Look Out For

For some children, developing communication can be a very difficult process. They may need extra help to develop their skills. You should be concerned if by 2 years, they are:

- Slow to follow simple instructions
- Not saying 25 recognisable words.

2-3 Years

This is a guide to how children develop speech and language between 2 and 3 years.

Children develop skills at different rates, but by 3 years usually children will:

- Listen to and remember simple stories with pictures
- Understand longer instructions, such as 'make teddy jump' or 'where's mummy's coat?'
- Understand simple 'who', 'what' and 'where' questions
- Use up to 300 words
- Put 4 or 5 words together to make short sentences, such as 'want more juice' or 'he took my ball'
- Ask lots of questions. They will want to find out the name of things and learn new words

- Use action words such as 'run' and 'fall' as well as words for the names of things,
- Start to use simple plurals by adding 's', for example 'shoes' or 'cars'
- Use a wider range of speech sounds. However, many children will shorten longer words, such as saying 'nana' instead of 'banana'. They may also have difficulty where lots of sounds happen together in a word, e.g. they may say 'pider' instead of 'spider'
- Often have problems saying more difficult sounds like sh, ch, th and r. However, people that know them can mostly understand them
- Now play more with other children and share things
- Sometimes sound as if they are stammering or stuttering. They are usually trying to share their ideas before their language skills are ready. This is perfectly normal at this age, just show you are listening and give them plenty of time. It's not helpful to draw attention to their 'stammering' by saying things like 'take your time'. Just try to be patient and not interrupt them.

How to Support Your Child

There are lots of things you can do to encourage children at this stage:

- Adding words to children's sentences can show them how words fit together. For example, if a child says, 'dolly hair' you can say 'brush dolly's hair'
- Often children enjoy helping. Sharing daily jobs gives a chance to talk about objects and actions
- Use puppets and pictures to help children listen to stories. Don't be afraid to tell a story more than once. Repetition helps children to understand and remember words
- Give children the correct example for sounds and words. This helps if they are having problems saying a certain word or sound. If you correct them or make them say it again, you can make them feel anxious. Simply repeat what they have said using the right words and sounds. With time they will be able to do it themselves.

Things to Look Out For

For some children, developing communication skills can be very difficult. It is important that parents seek advice from a speech and language therapist if:

- A child points or shows what they want rather than says it.
- They only say single words instead of joining words together into short sentences.
- They are slow to respond to your instructions.

- They rely on being shown what to do rather than being told.
- You cannot understand most of what they say.

3-4 Years

Children at 3 to 4 years will usually be actively learning language and asking many questions.

Children develop skills at different rates, but by 4 years usually children will:

- Listen to longer stories and answer questions about a storybook they have just read
- Understand and often use colour, number and time related words, for example, 'red' car, 'three' fingers and 'yesterday / tomorrow'
- Start to be able to answer questions about 'why' something has happened, although this still might be at quite a basic level
- Use longer sentences and link sentences together
- Describe events that have already happened, even if their sentences aren't exactly like adults' e.g. 'we went park'
- Enjoy make-believe play
- Start to like simple jokes even if they don't understand them
- Ask many questions using words like 'what' 'where' and 'why'
- Still make mistakes with tense such as say 'runned' for 'ran' and 'swimmed' for 'swam'
- Have difficulties with a small number of sounds – for example r, w, l, f, th, sh, ch and j
- Start to be able to plan games with others.

How to Support Your Child

There are lots of things you can do to encourage children at this stage:

- Have a special time to talk about the day. Talking about what has happened that day will help their memory skills. It will also help them to talk about things they cannot see and things that happened in the past which is an important skill for learning in school

- Wherever possible, use pictures, objects, puppets, acting, gestures and facial expressions. This will keep a child's interest
- Talk about or play games involving opposites like 'on and off' or 'big and little'
- Join a child in pretend play. Let them take the lead. This will help their language and creativity. Talk about what they are saying and doing rather than asking lots of questions. Your commentary helps their language skills and shows you are listening and interested
- Reversing roles can be great fun for a child. Let them be the 'mummy' or the 'teacher'. This helps them to talk about new situations
- Play with and talk about sequences of coloured bricks or shapes, numbers and days of the week.

Things to Look Out For

By 3 and a half years old a child should be understood by people outside the family. If not, parents should seek advice from a speech and language therapist.

You should be concerned if:

- They are struggling to turn ideas into sentences
- The language they use is jumbled and difficult to understand
- They are unresponsive or slow to follow instructions.

4-5 Years

This is a guide to how children develop speech and language between 4 and 5 years.

At this stage, they need to listen, understand more and share their ideas within the classroom. They will use their language skills to help them learn to read.

Children develop skills at different rates but by 5 years usually children will:

- Understand spoken instructions without stopping what they are doing to look at the speaker
- Choose their own friends and play mates
- Take turns in much longer conversations

- Understand more complicated language such as 'first', 'last', 'might', 'may be', 'above' and 'in between'
- Understand words that describe sequences such as "first we are going to the shop, next we will play in the park"
- Use sentences that are well formed. However, they may still have some difficulties with grammar. For example, saying 'sheeps' instead of 'sheep' or 'goed' instead of 'went'
- Think more about the meanings of words, such as describing the meaning of simple words or asking what a new word means
- Use most sounds effectively. However, they may have some difficulties with more difficult words such as 'scribble' or 'elephant'.

How to Support Your Child

There are lots of things you can do to encourage your child at this stage:

- Building relationships with your child's pre-school or school is very important. Find out what topics or songs they are learning. This can help you support new words and ideas your child is learning
- Playing board games that involve taking turns helps them to listen and concentrate for longer
- Encourage children to talk without being questioned. This can help them to talk more about their experiences. Open questions like 'what are you going to play with today?' encourage children to say more than 'yes' and 'no'. If they find it difficult to answer such open questions, give them choices, such as 'cars or animals?'
- Although children may know lots of different words it is important to introduce new words and phrases. This helps them to continue learning
- Having fun with words and rhymes can help children learn skills they need for reading and writing
- Children may need time to think before responding to questions and instructions. Give them time without answering for them or finishing their sentences.

Things to Look Out For

For some children, developing communication can be a very difficult process and they may need extra help. By 5 years you may see the following:

- Difficulty with abstract ideas such as size or time.
- Difficulty with complex sentences.
- Not having the right words to be able to say what they want.

- Difficulty organising ideas in order.
- Missing out some words. For example, saying 'playing ball' instead of 'the dog is playing with the ball'.
- Talking about lots of different topics in the same group of sentences.
- Not using the right sounds so that their speech is difficult to understand.

• 5-7 Years

This is a guide to how children develop speech and language between 5 and 7 years.

Often by 5 or 6 years, children have good communication skills. They are better at using language in different ways e.g. discussing ideas or giving opinions.

Children develop skills at different rates, but beyond 5 years, usually children will:

- Focus on one thing for longer without being reminded
- Rely less on pictures and objects to learn new words
- Use their language skills in learning to read, write and spell
- Learn that the same word can mean two things, such as 'orange' the fruit and 'orange' the colour
- Learn that different words can mean the same thing such as 'minus' and 'take away'
- Understand feelings and descriptive words like 'carefully', 'slowly' or 'clever'
- Use language for different purposes such as asking questions or persuading
- Share and discuss more complex ideas
- Use language in a range of social situations.

How to Support Your Child

There are lots of things you can do to encourage children at this stage:

- Help them to learn new words, such as words to do with positions, times and size.
- Make time to talk about your day
- Give a child time to talk to you
- Ask open questions like 'tell me something you liked about today'.

Things to Look Out For

A child at this age should have well-developed speech, language and communication skills. If they are finding language difficult, you might notice that they:

- Find it hard to learn and understand the meanings of words
- Find it hard to understand language about things in the past or future
- Struggle to understand phrases that can mean more than one thing, such as “pull your socks up”
- Respond to just part of an instruction, usually the beginning or end
- Use short sentences, often with words missing or in the wrong order
- Find it hard to make up stories. This shows in written work as well as talking
- Are not learning at school, but nobody can explain why
- Are struggling to make and keep friends.

7-11 Years

This is a guide to how children develop speech and language between 7 and 11 years.

Speech, language and communication development is a gradual process. Children develop skills at different rates but beyond 8 years, usually children will:

- Use language to predict and draw conclusions
- Use long and complex sentences
- Understand other points of view and show that they agree or disagree
- Understand comparative words e.g. ‘it was earlier than yesterday’
- Keep a conversation going by giving reasons and explaining choices
- Start conversations with adults and children they don’t know
- Understand and use passive sentences where the order of the words can still be confusing for younger children e.g. “the thief is chased by the policeman”.

How to Support Your Child

Good communication is two-way and requires good listening skills. To help a child, you will need to demonstrate good listening skills yourself. Make sure that you have time for this in your day. You may need to explain words that a child still does not know.

A child's vocabulary will be growing. Help them to understand new words they learn by talking about their meaning. Make sure they are not afraid to ask if they don't understand a word. If you don't know the exact meaning of a word - look it up in a child-friendly dictionary such as Collins Co-Build.

Just by having good conversations with children, you are supporting their language. So, talk to them. Ask them how their day at school was and how their friends are. Hopefully they don't need too much encouragement to talk. Try to encourage conversations rather than just you doing the talking.

Things to Look Out For

At this stage, children should have well-developed speech, language and communication skills. A child with delayed language might show the following behaviours:

- They may struggle to join in group conversations. This is because there is too much language
- They may find it hard to make up stories. This will show in their written work as well as talking
- Their stories may be muddled, making them difficult to follow
- They may find it hard to learn and understand the meanings of words
- They may struggle to understand language about things in the past or future
- They may find it hard to make predictions
- They may find it difficult to understand language where the meaning isn't clearly stated e.g. when the conversation involves new concepts or involves people or objects not present and visible to the child
- They may be struggling to learn at school. They could find it hard to understand what it is they are supposed to be doing, even though they have been told.

This is a guide to how children develop speech and language between 11-17 years.

Language development at this stage is a gradual process. Changes still take place but they are harder to see. Children need to learn to develop relationships and join in social activities on their own.

What to expect between the ages of 11 and 14

At this stage children will:

- Use longer sentences; usually 7-12 words or more
- Build their sentences using a range of conjunctions or joining words, such as 'meanwhile', 'however', 'except' so that they can convey complex ideas
- Know how to use sarcasm. Know when others are being sarcastic to them
- Be able to change topic well in conversations
- Use more subtle and witty humour
- Show some understanding of idioms, such as "put your money where your mouth is!"
- Know that they talk differently to friends than to teachers and be able to adjust this easily
- Understand and use slang terms with friends. They keep up with rapidly changing 'street talk'.

What to expect between 14-17 years

As they get older, young people can:

- Follow complicated instructions
- Know when they haven't understood. They will ask to be told again or have something specific explained
- Easily swap between 'classroom' talk and 'break-time' talk
- Tell long and very complicated stories.

How to Support Your Child

There are lots of things you can do to encourage young people at this stage:

- Encourage opportunities to talk without making them feel under pressure
- Use opportunities for chatting, like mealtimes
- Give everyone a chance to talk about their day, including you
- Help by explaining any words or phrases that they don't understand

- Show that you are interested by making time to listen.

Things to Look Out For

At this stage, children should have well-developed speech, language and communication skills. At this age, a child might have delayed language if they:

- Have difficulty giving specific answers or explanations
- Have difficulty sequencing their ideas in the right order
- Are better at understanding individual instructions than group instructions
- Find it difficult to understand language where the meaning isn't clearly stated
e.g. be able to infer that someone wants to close the window or turn up the heating when they say 'It's a bit chilly in here!'
- Find long and complicated instructions hard to understand
- Have trouble learning new words
- Take a long time to organise what they are going to say or write
- Take things too literally. For example, "I'll be back in a minute"
- Have difficulty taking turns in conversations
- Talk to teachers and friends in the same way.