

FACTSHEET

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Language development: the early years

Right from birth, babies learn language and communication skills and are able to react to different sounds. They develop skills to understand language long before they start speaking. Each baby will develop these skills at a different rate, although there is a general pattern of early language development.

Things babies do before they learn to talk

Babies interact with their world by:

- Crying and squealing.
- Calming to familiar voices or becoming quiet when familiar voices are heard.
- Exploring objects by banging them together, throwing, or mouthing them.
- Copying other people's actions eg. waving bye-bye.
- Blowing raspberries, to show excitement and pleasure.
- Looking at toys/simple pictures/people with others. This sharing of attention is an important skill.
- Using their faces to communicate eg. smiling, frowning.
- Listening to sounds and voices and trying to respond or interact.
- Learning to use their voice to communicate.
- Taking turns in making sounds.
- Cooing or using 'coos, goos, oohs and ahhs'.
- Babbling, e.g., 'bub-bub-bub' or 'da-da-da'.

Baby's first year is a very important period for communication and language development. The skills listed above need to be encouraged.

Developing first words

Gradually, children begin to develop more meaningful communication by:

- Using simple words such as 'mama' and 'dada' for their parents.
- Expressing 'yes' or 'no' by nodding or shaking of head.
- Making up words for particular objects e.g. 'dodo' for all animals.
- Starting to recognise and learn names of things they see a lot, eg. bear, car, ball.
- Using simple words to ask for something, e.g. 'bobo' for bottle.
- Still babbling but with some real words mixed in.
- Using other words such as 'more', 'all gone', 'up'.
- Starting to recognise and name simple body parts, e.g. eye, ear, nose.
- Following simple commands such as 'come here', 'sit down', 'get book', 'clap hands', 'wave bye'.

By the age of two years:

- Children have between 50-200 words that they use regularly.
- They are starting to put two and three words together to make little sentences, e.g. 'more juice', 'daddy go car', 'me up'.
- Children can answer simple questions such as 'what's that?', 'where is doggy?'
- Children can follow simple instructions with 2 key words, such as 'put the **apple** in the **bin**', 'give the **book** to **daddy**', 'get **shoes** and **ball**'. They can turn pages in board books and point to or name things they recognize.

By the age of three years:

- Children are using longer sentences of up to five words, e.g. 'I go to park mummy'.
- They can use words like 'and' to link up to sentences, 'I go shops and get icecream'.
- They understand and talk about colours, simple shapes, sizes and where things go. For example, they understand the difference between 'big' and 'little' and the difference between 'in', 'on', and 'under'.
- They are able to follow instructions with 3 key words, e.g. 'point to your **nose, eyes** and **tummy**', or 'give the **big ball** to **daddy**' – when they are paying attention.
- They can have a very simple conversation.
- They like to look at books with an adult and are able to point to pictures when asked; they also like to talk about the pictures.
- They are constantly learning new words.

What you can do to help your children learn to listen and talk

- Copy the playful sounds babies make as this will encourage two-way communication.
- Play simple games such as 'peek-a-boo' and tickle games.
- Talk, using short and simple sentences.
- Talk about and point out objects that can be seen and heard, eg. ball, car, plane.
- Sing songs and rhymes together.
- Expand on simple words, eg. the child says 'car'; you say 'push car'.
- Praise attempts to talk e.g. 'That's right... it is....'
- Smile and show that you are listening.
- Look at books together and talk about the pictures.
- Talk about what is happening when you are with other children.
- Set up opportunities for children to communicate, e.g., give them a choice between two things; keep a toy just out of reach so that the child has to, in some way, make a request for it, perhaps by making a sound, pointing, looking at you and then at the object, taking your hand; similarly, wait for the child to request help to do something before you respond.

- Make sure children are looking at you and you at them, when you talk.
- Take children for walks, go to the park and other fun places, and talk about these places to help them learn new words.
- Limit their amount of screen time, including TV, ipads, smartphones, and electronic games, to no more than 2 hours a day. This will also give you time during the day to do a variety of things with them.
- Encourage children to only watch television shows that will help them learn. Help them to be an active viewer and to understand what's on screen by asking questions or making comments about what they are watching e.g. "what's teddy doing?" "I can jump too", "Where's the circle?" etc.

When to get help

It is important to remember that every child develops at a different rate. If you are concerned that your child's talking is not developing, please contact a Speech Pathologist at your nearest Hospital or Community Health Centre (see Community Health Centres in your favorite search engine). Private speech pathologists may also be able to assist you and your child. The Speech Pathology Australia website (www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au) has a list of certified practicing speech pathologists.

Remember

- Communication begins at birth and the sounds that babies make have a purpose and are meaningful.
- Children learn by listening and watching - so talk to your child, sing songs and rhymes, look at books together.