

Learning to talk



Learning to talk is one of the most important skills young children develop. It helps them make sense of the world and engage with others. Language and speech development start at birth and progress quickly through the early years and beyond. As with other learning, it happens at different rates for individual children.

Ages and stages

The early months

Communication with your baby begins by responding to their needs when they cry. You are showing them they have been heard and that you care about them.

Long before they can speak babies are listening to you. They begin to make little noises and sounds. By copying these it is as if you are talking to each other - they love your enthusiasm and smiles. It's the start of them learning to talk.

If your baby was born prematurely adjust their age by subtracting the weeks/months they were born early, eg an 8 month baby born 2 months early has an adjusted age of 6 months. Check milestones for their adjusted age.

6-12 months

- Babies take turns making sounds with you.
- They stick out their tongue and blow "raspberries"; they make squealing noises too.
- By 9 months sounds like 'Mamamama', 'Dadadada' begin. By 12 months they say 'Mama' or 'Dada'.
- They can wave 'Bye-bye' by 12 months.
- They understand 'No', pausing briefly or stopping when you say it.

15-18 months

- At 15 months children attempt 1 or 2 new words, eg 'Da' for dog or 'Ba' for ball.

- They can point at things they want or to ask for help.
- They follow directions that use both gestures and words, eg when you hold out your hand and say 'Give me teddy'. By 18 months they only need the words.
- They try to say 3 or more words beyond 'Mama' or 'Dada' by 18 months.

2 to 3 years

- 2 year olds can point to objects in a book when you ask, eg 'Where is the ball?'
- They can put 2 or more words together, eg 'More drink'.
- New gestures appear, eg "blowing a kiss" or "nodding yes".
- By 30 months children say about 50 words including ones like 'I', 'Me', 'We'.
- They can name things you point to in a book.
- Their 2 word combinations include one action word, eg 'Doggie run'.

Learning to talk is important and should be fun. Talking, reading and singing often to babies and young children really helps them develop.





- 3 year olds can have conversations with 2 or more back-and-forth exchanges.
- They ask who/what/where/when/why questions, eg 'Where is mummy?'
- They can name actions in a book when asked, eg jumping or playing.
- They can say their first name when you ask.
- Others can understand what they are saying most of the time.

4 to 5 years

- By age 4 children use sentences with at least 4 words; they can say some words from a song, story or nursery rhyme too.
- They can talk about at least one activity, eg 'I played in the park'.
- They respond to simple questions such as 'What is a crayon for?'
- 5 year olds can retell or make up stories with 2 or more events, eg 'A cat was stuck in a tree and a firefighter saved it'.
- They can answer simple questions about a story you've just read them.
- They can use or recognise simple rhymes, eg ball-tall.

What you can do

- Talk/read/sing to your baby from birth. Copy their sounds and expressions.
- Talk as you do things together. Talk about what they're looking at/hearing/feeling, eg 'The wind is cold on your face isn't it?' They love hearing your voice.
- Let children hear lots of language. Name things, talk about the pictures in books, sing songs and recite nursery rhymes enthusiastically.
- Find books they really enjoy - share stories like an adventure! Be loud, use funny voices, have fun and laugh a lot.
- Repeat what your child says to show you understand, eg 'Drink'. Then add to this, eg 'You want a drink? I have water. Do you want water?'
- Don't correct their speech directly. Say the right word in conversation, eg if they say "nana" for "banana" you could say 'You want a banana?'

Seek advice if your child:

- does not react to loud noises by 1 month old
- does not turn their head to a noise or voice by 4-7 months
- does not start to make single sounds, eg 'ba ba' by 8-9 months
- does not make sounds or babble when talked to by 12 months
- is not starting to say single words by 18 months
- does not understand simple instructions by 2 years
- has been getting stuck on words or repeating sounds, eg 'Wh-wh-where's my ba-ba-ball?' or talking less because of this. Seeing a speech pathologist early on means they can keep an eye on any need to intervene
- loses language skills they once had.

Have your child's hearing checked if they have a history of ear infections or are slow to start talking. Hearing problems often cause speech difficulties.

If you are concerned about your child's speech talk to your child health nurse or other health professional. They may need to see a speech pathologist.

Want more information?

Parent Helpline

Phone 1300 364 100, 7 days, 7.15am–9.15pm
Advice on child health and parenting
After 9.15pm your call will go through to the national Healthdirect helpline

Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am–4.30pm, Mon–Fri
for an appointment
Free service for children aged 0–5. Nurses can help with children's health, eating, sleeping and development www.cafhs.sa.gov.au/

US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

For further information on children's language/communication milestones www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html

The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne

See 'Communication: Tips to encourage language development' www.rch.org.au/speech/Research_and_publications/

Speech Pathology Australia

See 'Communication Milestones Kit' www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au

Raising Children Network

For information on raising children, including language development and bilingual children www.raisingchildren.net.au

Parenting SA

For other Parent Easy Guides including: 'Milestones: children 0–4 years', 'Why stories are important', 'More than reading and writing', 'Growing and learning in the family' www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Acknowledgement: The developmental milestones outlined in this Guide are sourced from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/actearly/milestones/index.html

Note: The term 'Parents' in this Guide refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children and young people, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, foster or kinship carers.



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Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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