

Early Communication

*for babies
and young
children*



Provided by Speech Pathology,
Northern Sydney Local Health District

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Early Intervention

Introduction

Children develop their understanding of language and ability to talk as they grow and learn from those around them. They learn by being spoken to, by being involved in daily activities and through repetition. Over time, a child's experiences and exposure to language will help them understand words and express themselves using sounds, gestures and then words. However not all children learn to talk or understand language easily.

The following information is a guide to typical development with some suggestions on how you can help your child if they are having difficulty with communication. It should be noted that developmental norms apply equally to boys and girls (The Hanen Centre, 2015) as well as for bilingual children (ASHA, 2020). All children should learn language in the same way and at the same rate.

If you have concerns or questions about your child's communication, speak to your early childhood nurse or consider a Speech Pathology referral (please refer to contact details on page 15).



Typically Developing Communication

0 to 6 months

What to expect at this age

- Babies start to recognise familiar sounds, voices and words.
- They start to look at your face.
- From 6 weeks, babies begin to smile in response to your facial expressions or voice.
- Between 2-4 months, babies start to make cooing noises. This typically occurs when they are happy and comfortable.
- From 4 months, babies tune into different sounds around them.

6 to 12 months

What to expect at this age

Babies start to:



How you can help from birth to 12 months

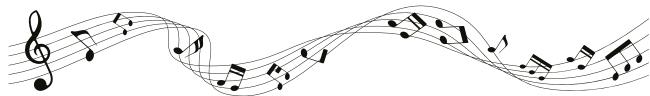
- Engage with your child by looking into their eyes when doing activities such as feeding, changing and cuddling.
- Play with musical instruments and sounds (e.g. rattles, your voice, singing) to encourage your child to turn towards the sound.
- Play games such as peek-a-boo. Imitate the noises that your child makes and then wait for them to make another sound before copying them again.
- If your child doesn't make sounds yet, make simple noises that are easy to copy (e.g. 'ah') and then look at them with an expectant look, waiting for them to have a go. This will teach them that they need to respond.
- When your child looks at something they are interested in, help them learn to point, by pointing yourself and telling them what they are looking at. Children need your help to learn words.
- When you teach words, make sure you repeat them. For example, if you are talking about a bird, point to the bird and say the word 'bird' several times.
- When you talk with your child, exaggerate your expression so that words sound interesting.
- Use gestures when you talk so your child learns the names of verbs (action words). For example, wave when you say 'hello' and when you clap, say the word 'clap'.
- Read simple books to your child and tell them what you can see in the pictures. Children like books that have textures and things they can touch.

12 to 18 months

What to expect at this age

Young toddlers will:

- Say their first words around 12 months of age.
- Imitate sounds such as ‘moo, baa, uh oh.’
- Know three or more body parts.
- Enjoy simple songs and rhymes – particularly those with actions.
- Take some turns in simple games.



18 to 24 months

What to expect at this age

Toddlers will:

- Say about 30-50 words at 18 months. This will grow over the next few months.
- Start to combine words (e.g. ‘bye daddy’, ‘more drink’).
- Understand and answer simple questions (e.g. ‘Where’s the dog?’ ‘What’s that?’).
- Start to engage in pretend play with toys.
- Listen to a short and simple story.



How you can help from 12 to 24 months

- Watch to see what your child is interested in and talk about things that are happening around them.
- Keep using the names of objects and actions and make them sound interesting.
- Repeat the words over and over as it can take many repetitions for a child to learn a new word. You can also add a gesture to the word to make it easier for them to copy.
- Model meaningful noises (e.g. ‘beep beep’, ‘uh oh’, ‘bang’) for your child to copy. Sounds are often easier to copy than real words.
- Sing to your child and pause to see if they will finish the song with the words they know (e.g. ‘Twinkle twinkle little.....’). If they don’t, say the word for them.
- Children like games that have turns such as rolling a ball back and forth, peek-a-boo and bubbles. Take note of what your child is interested in and take turns with them in that game/activity.
- Help your child learn to combine 2-3 words into sentences by modelling short sentences to them. For example, if they say “plane”, you could say ‘big plane’ or ‘noisy plane’ or ‘The plane is flying’. Stress the new word by making it a bit louder.
- If you ask a question, your child may not answer even if you think they know the word. Be sure to help your child by just telling them the answer.
- Young children enjoy simple puzzles, books with textures to feel, and books with flaps they can lift to see what is hiding underneath. They usually find it more interesting to touch pictures, open flaps and talk about what is in the pictures rather than reading a whole story.
- Make sure you pause and wait for a moment, so your child can take a turn in the book.
- Your child may only be able to attend to games and activities briefly at this age. Follow their lead and move with your child to the next activity they are interested in.
- Praise your child for following the directions you give them. If they don’t follow the first time, you can repeat the instruction with a gesture or break up longer instructions into smaller ones.

2 to 2½ years

What to expect at this age

- At 24 months children will say about 250 words.
- Children use simple word combinations and some little sentences (e.g. 'daddy work', 'turn hose on').
- They understand and say simple location words (e.g. in, on, under, up, down).
- They can find pictures in books and know their body parts.
- Children can follow instructions with two parts (e.g. 'Get the ball and roll it to me').
- They can understand and answer questions (e.g. 'What is the boy doing?').
- They might say words sometimes and then not say them again.



2½ to 3 years

What to expect at this age

- Children go from using little sentences of two words to longer sentences of five or more words.
- Children use lots of different types of words (naming words, verbs/action words, describing words, location words).
- They start to use words like 'I', 'me', 'you', 'he', 'she', 'big', 'little' and 'same'.
- From 3 years, children start to tell simple stories.
- They can follow instructions with two or more parts.
- Children will understand simple 'wh' questions e.g. 'who', 'what', 'where', 'what's ____ doing?'
- Their sentences become more complex and they will start using words such as 'a', 'the' and 'and' to join sentences together.

How you can help from 2 to 3 years

- Keep saying the names of objects and talk about features such as the size of objects (e.g. big, small), the temperature (e.g. hot, cold) and things you can do with them (e.g. verbs such as drink, eat, throw).
- Try not to ask your child questions all the time. It will really help if you can use more comments than questions. For example, 'That's a big cat' instead of 'What is that?' or 'That's a big cat, isn't it?'
- To make sentences, your child needs to know lots of verbs (action words). Try to teach them verbs throughout the day and add a gesture to show the meaning. For example, if you say 'drinking', make a gesture as if you are putting a pretend cup to your mouth.
- If your child says a word like 'cup', add one or two extra words to what they say. You could say 'That's your cup' or 'It's my cup' or 'It's a little cup' or 'Drink from the cup'. This will help them learn how to make longer sentences.
- Encourage book time with your child. They might still enjoy books with flaps to open and textures to touch. If your child can't listen to a full story, just talk about some of the pictures together as this will still be helpful.
- Some children talk in sounds that don't make sense or their speech does not sound very grown up yet. You can help your child by repeating what you think they are saying, with clear pronunciation. There is no need to ask your child to copy you.
- If your child leaves out words in their sentences (e.g. 'Get cup me'), try repeating the sentence with the correct grammatical structures (e.g. 'I can get the cup for you').
- Your child might use many non-specific words such as 'it', 'this', 'that', 'those', 'here' or 'there'. You can help them by using the specific words they are having difficulty saying e.g. If they say, 'It goes there', you could say 'The cup goes on the table'.

Further Ways in Which You Can Develop Your Child's Communication

A child needs many skills in order to listen and understand language and to generate words or sounds themselves. Learning to communicate is not just a matter of using words.

Encourage Eye Contact

Your child is more likely to listen to what you say or find it easier to copy you if they are watching your face. There are a number of ways you can help your child increase their eye contact:

- Hold the toy or the object they want (drink, biscuit, car) near your face while you say the word ('drink') or meaningful sound ('beep beep').
- Take one or both of their hands to your face – their eyes are likely to follow along the line of their arm to your face.
- Make sure you get down to your child's level so that you can be face-to-face when you are talking to them, playing or reading books.



Encourage Attention

Attention is essential for developing language. Your child needs to attend to the sounds and words around them in order to understand and respond appropriately.

This is a very important step in communication and you should make sure you respond to your child and talk about what you are both looking at, while using plenty of expression in your voice.

You can develop your child's attention by helping them "finish" an activity such as a puzzle or a book. Setting clear and realistic expectations of the activity at the beginning may be helpful. For example, you could say 'Let's do this puzzle. Let's try really hard to finish it together'. If you get your child to stay with something a little longer each time, you may gradually extend their attention span. Praise them for their efforts and for finishing an activity.

Taking turns is an important preverbal skill. This can be developed through play activities such as rolling or throwing a ball to each other, stacking blocks to make a tower, blowing and popping bubbles, pushing a car to each other and playing peek-a-boo.

As your child joins in an interaction you need to keep the interaction going by taking turns. The longer the interaction, the more opportunities your child has to learn language.

- WAIT for your child to take a turn. Don't take over the activity, even if you think your child could be doing something better.
- Don't talk too much and don't take too long when it is your turn.
- Let your child set the pace of the turn taking.
 - If your child is busy and active you may need to increase the pace to keep their attention.
 - If your child needs more time to think and take their time, slow down and don't rush them.

Encourage your child to copy meaningful noises or actions

If your child is not readily imitating words, often imitating actions or sounds will help your child get started on copying what you say.

Farm animals

- cow - moo
- sheep - baah
- duck - quack

Cars and trucks

- car - beep, brmm
- fire truck - ee-or-ee-or

Action

- waving
- banging blocks together
- popping bubbles
- pushing a car
- hiding or dropping a toy

Sounds/words

- bye bye
- bang
- pop pop
- go!
- uh oh!



Make sure that you always accompany these actions with words.

Encourage Gestures

Gesture is an important part of communication development that happens before children use their first words. Using gestures helps children to learn new words and to combine words and is an indicator of later language success. As a general guide, a child of 16 months will use around 16 gestures. Examples of early gestures include: giving, shaking head, reaching (to request), raising arms (to be picked up), waving, pointing, clapping, blowing kisses and giving high 5's.

Children will initially use gesture to show us something. They will start by showing the object, then giving, then pointing. Children will then learn to use gesture to request. They may open and shut their hand or pull the parent to what they want. Children may then start to combine their gestures with words (e.g. pointing to a dog and saying 'big' meaning 'big dog').

To help your child use gesture:

- Point to and hold up objects for your child to see.
- Use natural gesture when talking about objects, e.g. make the shape of a ball with your hands when talking about a ball.
- Always say the word when you do the gesture.
- Make gesture part of your everyday interactions.
- Respond to your child's attempts at gesture.

The use of natural gesture is encouraged. There is no need to teach specifically developed baby signs.

Create a need to talk

If you anticipate everything your child needs or wants, they may be less likely to talk. Try not to anticipate your child's needs so they have a need to talk.

- If your child is pointing at a ball and grunting:
 - Don't give them the ball immediately.
 - Say 'ball', then wait and see if they try the word before giving them the ball.
 - If they don't attempt the word, repeat 'ball' and give them the ball.
- You can create the need to talk by sabotaging everyday activities. Try to:
 - Give them their cereal but "forget" to give them their spoon.
 - Put their favourite toy on a high shelf where they can see it but can't reach it. Wait and see if your child uses a gesture, sound or word to let you know there's a problem. Then say a word that they could use in that situation. Maybe your child will attempt the word.

Use Simple Language

It is easier for a child to understand and copy shorter sentences. Although you may feel your child understands everything that you say, using short simple sentences will make it easier for them to copy you.

- Keep your sentences short and simple.
- Speak slowly so that your child has a chance to copy you.
- Stress the important words in a sentence, e.g. 'That's a big truck!'
- Always keep your sentences grammatically correct.
- Use actions and gestures to give your child extra information so that they understand what you are talking about. Raise your arms in a lifting action as you say "I'll pick you up".
- Where possible, try to use action words (verbs). Verbs are the building blocks for making longer sentences.
- Allow time for your child to copy you but don't force them. Avoid asking your child to repeat words after you (e.g. 'say ball'). It may put pressure on your child and make them reluctant to talk.
- Expand on what your child says. For example, if they say 'car', you can add on a word and say 'A big car' or add on an idea by saying, 'The car is driving'.

Ask the Right Questions

- We often use questions when trying to get our children to talk more, but too many questions may put pressure on your child. The result can be that they actually talk less.
- Be careful not to constantly test your child by asking lots of questions such as 'What's that?'.
- If you find you use lots of questions with your child, try making more comments instead. For example, instead of 'What's that?', try 'Look at the elephant. He's big'. By using comments you are teaching your child, not testing them.
- Asking lots of yes/no questions (e.g. 'Do you want milk?') may limit your child's response. You can try a choice question (e.g. 'Do you want milk or water?') or an open-ended question (e.g. 'What do you want to drink?').

Questions play an important role in our interactions with our children but we need to find the right balance.



Develop your Child's Play

Play has many purposes – it is a serious business that should not be under-estimated. Although play is fun it is also a child's way of learning. Play gives your child the opportunity to develop new skills through watching and experimenting with different toys or activities.

Children are more likely to repeat words about things that they are interested in. If we encourage play and support children to develop pretend play it will help with their language development. Pretend play is often called symbolic play and occurs when a child pretends that an object is something else (e.g. pretend to stir a pencil in a cup). Children will first copy home routines in their play, such as cooking or cleaning and then start to create their own make-believe situations. This helps their later development of narratives (storytelling) based on the sequences of play. Parents can help their child by joining in their play and showing them how to play with toys such as teddies, dolls or animals.

During Play Time:

- **Join in** – Even if your child doesn't start an interaction, you can join in their play. If they are lying on the floor rolling a ball, make sure that you get a ball too, get down on the floor and start rolling your own ball. Make sure that you don't lead the play. Watch what they are doing and play like they are playing. Don't try to change the activity or take over the game by showing them a "better" way of playing. Play like a child.
- **Show interest in the things that your child is interested in** – If they want to wave a piece of paper but you want to build a block tower, make sure that you wave a piece of paper.
- **Copy what your child does** – Get a toy that's similar to your child's so that you can join in and imitate what they are doing. If you don't have your own toy you may find yourself just watching your child play or directing how they should be playing which is not ideal. It is better if you are part of the play.
- **Pretend** – Make believe that the toy or object is real. e.g. pretend to feed the teddy real food, pretend to drink from an empty cup, or pretend to stir the dinner in a bowl.



Early words you can teach your toddler

When talking with your child, use and teach lots of naming words, verbs, position words and describing words. A variety of words will help your child to combine words to build early sentences.

Naming Words

People such as Mum, Dad, Aunty, teacher

Farm animals such as pig, duck, horse, dog

Body parts such as eye, nose, hands

Furniture such as bed, chair, table

Wild animals such as lion, monkey, snake

Toys such as ball, blocks, bubble

Clothes such as socks, jumper, shirt

Transport such as plane, car, truck, bus

Food such as banana, chips, sandwich

Drinks such as milk, juice, tea

Pets such as dog, cat, rabbit, fish



Verbs

drink	eat	draw	shut	climb	read
fly	go	fix	kick	throw	open
jump	drive	knock	bang	drop	ride
fall	catch	kiss	swim	look	push
blow	carry	sit	break	cry	dance
put	want	pull	stop	sleep	pop

Position Words

here up there in on down

Describing Words

dirty hot big yum scratchy spotty

Other Words

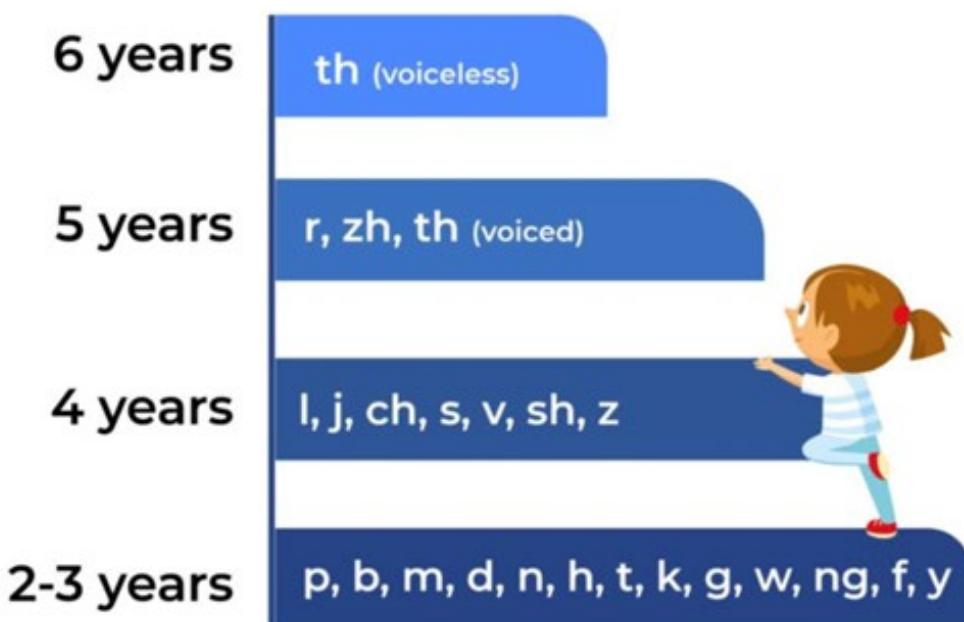
bye bye hello more no gone yes

Typical acquisition of speech sounds

Ages of Acquisition

A great deal of evidence is available to support the fact that the average child does not acquire speech sounds and sound combinations in exactly the same sequence or at exactly the same age. Although all children tend to follow similar patterns of speech development, there is research available which demonstrates that the speech of girls is likely to be acquired faster than that of boys.

The norms which are offered here should be used as a guide only.



Average age children learn to pronounce English consonants correctly
(Based on 15 English speech acquisition studies compiled by McLeod and Crowe, 2018)

McLeod, S. & Crowe, K. (2018). Children's consonant acquisition in 27 languages: A cross-linguistic review. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*. doi:10.1044/2018_AJSLP-17-0100. Available from: <https://ajslp.pubs.asha.org/article.aspx?articleid=2701897>

Speech Clarity

Familiar listeners such as parents and close family members generally understand much more of the child's speech than an unfamiliar listener. A child's speech clarity can be reduced when the child uses longer sentences or when speaking about a topic which is unfamiliar to the listener or out of context.

Typically,

- By 18 months Parents understand 25% of the child's talking
- By 24 months Parents understand 50 – 75% of the child's talking
- By 36 months Parents understand 75 – 100% of the child's talking

Additional information which relates to early communication

Hearing

Most infants are now screened for hearing as part of the Statewide Infant Screening - Hearing (SWISH) program. This screening does not account for fluctuating hearing loss that is common in young children and is known as conductive hearing loss (often known as “glue ear” or otitis media).

- Conductive hearing loss is the most common type of loss. The sound travelling to the hearing nerve is affected by fluid in the middle ear (associated with colds and airway congestion) or blockage of the ear canal by excessive wax.
- Children will often still hear sounds but the quality is reduced.
- 1 in 3 young children will have undetected conductive hearing loss at some stage. Children between the ages of 2 and 8 are at risk of a conductive hearing loss. Children under 2 years are at greater risk.
- A conductive hearing loss can fluctuate. The degree of loss can vary and the hearing loss can appear, disappear and reappear.
- If you suspect your child has a hearing loss, consult your GP and arrange a hearing test for your child.



Screen Time (TV, Tablets, Smartphones)

Recent research indicates that screen time (TV, tablets, smartphones) use in children younger than 2 years, including programs which are described as “educational” in content, can have a negative effect on a child’s language development. Adults should limit their own screen time around their children as children copy what they see.

Australian guidelines recommend that:

- Children under 2 years should not spend any time viewing TV or playing on electronic media.
- Children between 2 and 5 years should spend less than one hour each day on electronic media.

Reasons for this include:

- Children learn and remember information better from a real person than from a video.
- A child who is watching electronic media will be spending less time interacting with their parents or siblings. A young child’s vocabulary size is directly related to the amount of time their parents spend speaking to them.
- Television viewing in children under the age of three has been associated with irregular sleep schedules. Poor sleep habits can affect a child’s mood, behaviour, and concentration.
- Children who watch more TV or spend time with electronic media such as iPads, will have less time being read to or looking at books. This can affect their progress with reading later.
- Increased time spent watching TV is associated with a greater risk of delayed language development.

Speaking Two Or More Languages To Your Child

There is no evidence to suggest that bilingualism causes language delays in children. It is also true that children with language and developmental delays are capable of learning two languages.

Several factors can affect a child's ability to learn two languages:

- The age of the child when the second language is introduced. It is easier for children to learn two or more languages than it is for teenagers or adults.
- The amount of time the child is exposed to the second language.
- The motivation to learn the language and how much importance is placed on learning this language.
- The model the child hears. If the parents are speaking in a second language which they are not competent or confident in, then the child will have less success learning this language.

When a child is learning a new language it is typical for them to:

- Mix the two languages together in a sentence. Often they may know the word they need in one language but not in the other language.
- Go through a “silent period” when they are first introduced to the language. They may be consolidating their knowledge of these languages before they are willing to use them.
- They may lose some of their first language for a period of time when learning the new language.

To help your child be more successful learning two languages you should:

- Avoid using two languages in one sentence so that the child finds it easier to distinguish between the two languages.
- Use your own primary language as this is the language that you are most fluent in. By using this language you will provide a good language model for your child.
- Try to use the one language for specific activities. For example you may like to use English at bath time and Japanese at bedtime/story time.

You may find the following video useful;
Helping Your Child Learn Two Languages,
created by South Eastern Sydney Local Health District.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PIrD7PkeDdg>



Dummies

For some babies, the use of a dummy can be soothing and make them easier to settle.

However, dummy use can sometimes have adverse effects:

- An alert baby using a dummy is less likely to engage in vocal play such as babbling.
- An older toddler using a dummy is less likely to use words and any word attempts will not be clear.
- There is a strong correlation between dummy use and dental problems.

Be aware of how often you are using the dummy at home. Try to limit the use of the dummy to when it is needed to soothe your child or settle them to sleep. If your child is awake and happy, remove the dummy, allowing them to spend time practising sounds (babble) and attempting words. Try to wean your child from all dummy use at 12 months of age.

How to refer your child to Speech Pathology

Research shows that birth to 3 years of age is a critical time for children's speech and language development and early referral and detection of language difficulties is essential for supporting children with language difficulties.

If you have any concerns about your child's communication, please contact the Speech Pathology service in your local area.

A doctors referral is not required.

North Shore Ryde Child and Family Health Service

Ryde  9926 5844

RNS & Chatswood  9462 9200

Hornsby Ku-Ring-Gai Health Service

 9485 7569

Northern Beaches Health Service

 9951 0299

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