

Provided by Speech Pathology,
Northern Sydney Local Health District

Communication

in 3-5 year olds



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This booklet will help you to monitor your child's language development and give you simple ideas to help promote good communication at home.

What is Communication?

“Communication” involves speaking, hearing, listening, understanding, social skills, reading, writing and using your voice. Speech pathologists diagnose and treat communication difficulties across the following five areas:

Speech refers to using sounds in words so that people can understand what is being said.

Language refers to communicating ideas in words and sentences. This can be divided into:

- the ability to understand a spoken message. This includes words, sentences, stories and instructions.
- the ability to express a spoken message. It includes using sentences that are grammatically and structurally correct and using a wide range of vocabulary.

Pragmatics (social communication) refers to the social use of language. It includes turn taking, making eye contact, listening skills and the ability to have a conversation.

Fluency refers to the smooth flow of speech. Disruptions to the flow of speech (such as repetitions of sounds, words or phrases) are referred to as a stutter.

Voice refers to how we use our vocal cords (voice box) to talk.



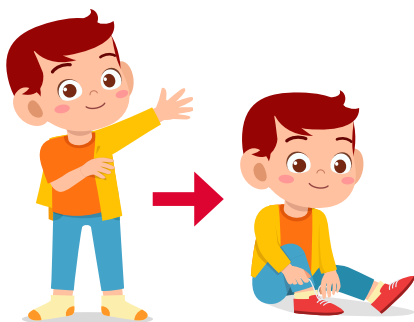
Typical Language Development

3 to 4 years

What to expect

How you can help

Follows 2-3 step instructions



Before giving an instruction, make sure you have your child's attention. Encourage them to look at you when you're giving them an instruction.

Start with simple instructions and gradually add more steps e.g.

'Get your shoes.'

'Get your shoes and wait at the door.'

'Get your shoes and bag and wait at the door.'

Identifies objects by function

(e.g. What do you eat with?)

Talk about what an object is and what you do with it e.g. at breakfast, 'I use the knife to cut my food' or at bath time, 'I use shampoo to wash my hair.'

Understands a range of questions

(e.g. who, what, where)

Help your child to answer questions such as 'Who ate the biscuits?', 'Where did we go this morning?'

Uses 4-5 word sentences

To encourage longer sentences, try adding one or two words to what your child says e.g.

Child: 'Cow is eating.'

Adult: 'The cow is eating some grass.'

Uses a range of basic grammar:

- Plurals
- Regular past tense (e.g. clapped)
- Pronouns (e.g. he, she, they, us, his, hers, our, theirs, myself)
- Prepositions (e.g. next to, behind, in front of)

Model basic grammar in play and everyday activities:

'I've got two cars, you've got two buses.'

'The dog jumped in the mud.'

'That is *our* house.' 'The book belongs to the girl.

It is *hers*.' 'I can dress *myself*.'

Look for toys in a hide-and-seek game e.g.

'*under* the chair', '*behind* the lounge',

'*between* the cushions'.

Asks simple questions

(e.g. What are you doing? Where's daddy? Who is that?)

Model simple questions in everyday situations, play and during book time e.g. 'What's this?' or 'Where did the cat go?'

4 to 5 years

What to expect

How you can help

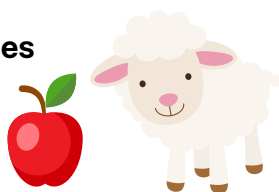
Follows 3-step instructions

(e.g. Get the flower, give it to me and then wash your hands; Put your toys away, get your books and line up at the door).

Make sure you have your child's attention before giving them instructions. Encourage them to look at you and listen closely. You can help your child's listening skills by gradually increasing the length of your instructions. You can do this with games like 'Simon Says' as well.

Understands the categories of objects

(e.g. foods, animals, household items, clothing)



You can discuss categories together during everyday activities such as:
-shopping e.g. 'Let's get all the vegetables first'
-play e.g. 'Find the animals that live on the farm.'

Understands story sequence

When you have finished reading a book, talk about what happened at the beginning and then ask 'What happened next?'

Use sequence words such as 'next, and then, after, finally, at the end.'

Develops an understanding of concepts of time

(e.g. today, tomorrow, yesterday, morning and night)



Discuss when events are going to happen e.g. 'Tomorrow we are going to Grandma's house! You need to wait one more night!' Talk about past events e.g. 'Tell Daddy what we did today' or 'Tell Grandma what we saw when we went to the park yesterday.'

Uses four or more words in a sentence and engages in long conversations

To encourage your child to use longer sentences, try adding one or two words to their sentence e.g.

Child: 'Look, a plane.'

Adult: 'Yes, the plane is flying!'

Develops further grammar:

- Possessives (e.g. the girl's)
- Developing irregular plurals (e.g. mice)
- Developing irregular past tense (e.g. drew)
- Pronouns *himself, herself, itself, ourselves*

Provide a model for your child:

'It's the girl's dog.'

'There are lots of mice.'

'He ate it.' 'They went home.'

'Can you dress yourself?'

'We can look after ourselves.'

4 to 5 years continued...

What to expect

How you can help

Asks and answers a range of questions

(e.g. who, what, where, why, how, when)

Ask different questions when reading books e.g. 'Why is the boy crying?', 'What's going to happen next?', 'What could his mum do now?'

Incorporate questions into conversation e.g. 'When did we go to the park?'

Uses early conjunctions

(e.g. and, but, because)

You can help your child by exploring cause-and-effect relationships in play e.g. 'Dolly is going to bed *because* she is tired!'

Explains the functions of objects

(e.g. The blanket keeps me warm)

Daily routines, playtime and books provide great opportunities to teach the functions of objects. Simple questions can be used to teach this e.g. 'What do we do with a cup?' or 'What is a cup used for?'



5 to 6 years

What to expect

How you can help

Understands a range of questions

(e.g. why, how, when)

Incorporate a variety of questions into conversation and book sharing time.

Model the answer or give your child a choice of two answers if your child has difficulty responding correctly.

Labels their emotions

(e.g. I'm tired, I'm angry)



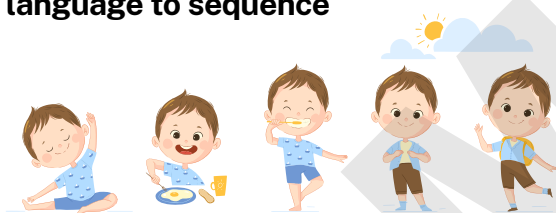
You can introduce emotions by talking about your own e.g. 'I had fun playing cars with you today. That game made me feel happy.' Asking questions can help your child to discuss their own emotions e.g. 'How did you feel when Jasmine took your pencil?'

Explains why something happened

(e.g. The apples fell out because there was a hole in the bag.)

Help your child to answer 'why' questions. Encourage them to think about possible reasons. This will improve their language for solving problems.

Uses language to sequence



Routines and story recalls are effective ways to help your child develop their sequencing skills. e.g. 'First we get dressed and then we have our breakfast' or 'First we went to the park and then we went to the shops'.

Uses conjunctions to make complex sentences

(e.g. when, so, if)

Books are a great way to encourage children to begin to link ideas e.g. 'Sam couldn't sleep so he went downstairs for a glass of milk.'

Uses more descriptive language

(e.g. long, hard, spiky)

Play guessing games where you give clues that involve describing. Play 'I Spy' games with describing words. Use books to talk about describing words that come up. Add describing words to your child's sentences.

Uses concepts of time

(e.g. today, tomorrow, yesterday, morning, night)

Encourage your child to ask and answer 'when' questions e.g. 'When are we going to Grandma's?', 'When did we go to the park?' If your child can't answer the question, make sure you say the answer for them (e.g. 'We're going to Grandma's tomorrow', 'We went to the park yesterday').

Further ways to help develop communication



Below are some techniques to help develop your child's speech and language.

Getting your child's attention first

Get down to your child's level and get their attention before speaking or asking a question. Young children find it difficult to listen if they are busy with a game or activity. Saying their name first encourages them to stop, look and listen.

Use more comments than questions

Asking too many questions can stop the flow of conversation. Try making a comment instead to focus on teaching (not testing) your child (e.g. 'Wow that's a big red bus' instead of asking 'What colour is the bus?'). If you do ask your child a question, try questions that keep the conversation going (e.g. 'Why is the boy sad?') rather than questions that only require a 'yes' or 'no' answer (e.g. 'Is the boy sad?').

Demonstrate the correct way to say words and sentences

If your child makes a mistake in a word or sentence, just say it correctly back to them rather than pointing out the mistake (e.g. if your child says 'I *goed* to the park', you might say 'Yes, you *went* to the park'). Do not ask your child to repeat the sentence.

Take turns in a conversation

Make time every day to have a conversation with your child. Encourage back and forth turns when talking. Talk about what your child is interested in and then wait for them to take a turn. Once your child has had their turn to speak, you help to continue the conversation.

Give your child time to respond

Children often need time to put their thoughts together before answering so give your child longer to respond than you would with an adult. Make sure you pause to give your child time to respond and maintain eye contact as you wait for them to take their turn.

Expand on your child's words and sentences

Add a couple of words to your child's sentence (e.g. if your child says 'Look, a truck', you could say 'Yes, a noisy garbage truck'). By doing this you'll be showing that you've heard what they've said and are demonstrating the next stage of language development.

Make language learning fun

Speak in a lively, animated voice. Use gesture and facial expression to match your words. By using gesture you'll be giving your child more clues about what your words mean. Children learn through books, play and everyday routines. Make learning new vocabulary fun and memorable e.g. if you are talking about fruits, encourage your child to feel, taste and smell the various fruits.

Bilingualism

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:

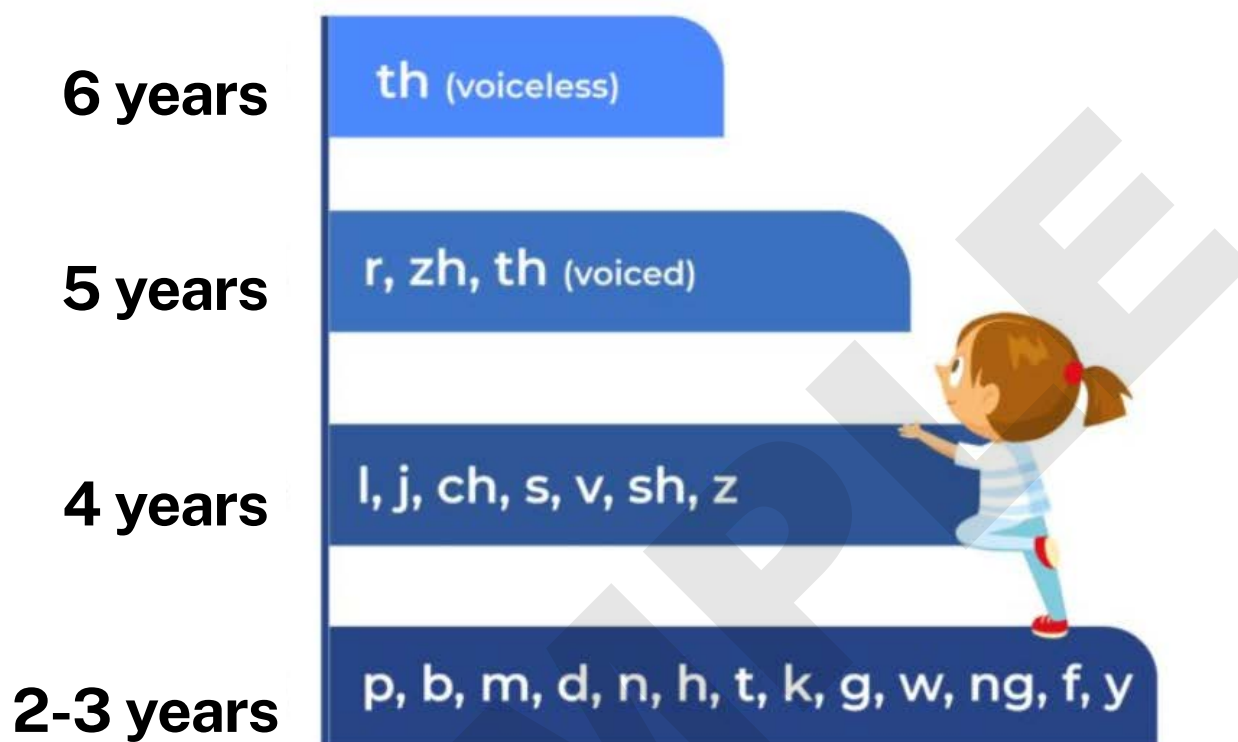
- Avoid using two languages in one sentence so that the child finds it easier to distinguish between the two languages.
- Use your own primary language as this is the language that you are best at. By using this language you will be providing good language models for your child.
- Try to use the one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

For more information watch this video 'Helping Your Child Learn Two Languages', created by South Eastern Sydney Local Health District. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PlrD7PkeDdg>



Typical Speech Sound Development

Children learn to produce different speech sounds at different ages. Below is a guide for when your child should be saying a range of different sounds.



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>

By the time children are 4 years old, their speech should be easy for others to understand.

If your child has difficulties saying sounds correctly, say the same word or sentence back exaggerating the correct sounds.

e.g. Your child says: "A little tat!"
You say: "Yes, a little cat!"

Typical Play Skill Development

The best learning happens when children play. Play has many benefits in developing language, storytelling and social skills.

3 to 4 years

What to expect

- Takes turns with other children and can play with 2 or 3 children in a group
- Continues to develop their pretend play such as playing in the home corner, dressing up and cooking
- Role play can involve many steps

4 to 5 years

What to expect

- Usually prefers playing with other children to playing by themselves
- Starts creating problems in their play that need solving (e.g. the boat has a hole in it)
- Enjoys playing games with simple rules (e.g. hide and seek)
- Play themes expand beyond personal experience (e.g. fireman rescuing people)

5 to 6 years

What to expect

- Negotiates with others during play
- Play includes themes never personally experienced (e.g. pirates, going to space)
- Play is well organised and complex
- Role play is more realistic



How you can help

- Provide your child with the opportunity to engage in lots of different types of play, such as:
 - Sand pit and water play (e.g. making cities in the sandpit, floating sticks/feathers in water)
 - Craft activities (e.g. paper plate animal faces, telescopes made out of cardboard, toilet roll people)
 - Physical activities (e.g. building cubby houses, going to the playground, ball games)
 - Household activities and routines (e.g. pretending to wash, vacuum, cook)
- Play with your child to develop their play skills. You can do this by:
 - Showing them new ways to play with toys (e.g. if your child only builds towers with blocks you can show them how to make roads/bridges/boats/cars with the blocks).
 - Showing them play routines (e.g. feeding the doll, bathing the doll, dressing the doll, then putting the doll to bed).
- Model 'problems' during play, to support the development of your child's problem solving skills (e.g. tea party – spilling the tea; car play – car gets a flat tyre and needs a tow truck to come and take it to a mechanic). This encourages your child to think about how they could 'solve the problem' and develops the language needed for this too.
- Remember to talk with your child during play. This is a great way to introduce new vocabulary in a fun way (e.g. 'The girl is exhausted. Exhausted means she's really tired.'). It also allows you to teach correct grammar or sentence structure (e.g. 'The horse jumped. The cow jumped. The pig jumped.').
- Practice social skills in play such as taking turns, sharing, and using eye contact when talking.
- Try to maintain your child's interest in their toys by swapping a few toys with a friend for a week, or packing some of your child's toys away and then alternating the toys every couple of weeks.
- Add things to a toy box to encourage a variety of play – play doh, dress ups, craft items (e.g. pencils, glue, scissors, paper), Lego/building blocks, animal and people toys, pretend play toys (e.g. food, kitchen set, broom).
- A toy library is a good resource to expand your child's play skills. There are many internet sites that will list Toy Libraries in your area.



Typical Attention Development

The development of attention skills is essential for learning language and communicating effectively. Your child's age and language ability will affect how their attention develops.

3 to 4 years

What to expect

- Can still only focus on one activity at a time
- Can switch their attention between the speaker and an activity, without the adult needing to re-focus their attention
- Will concentrate for shorter periods when tasks are more difficult

4 to 5 years

What to expect

- Can split their attention between two people or activities
- Can do an activity and listen at the same time
- Can listen in a group situation

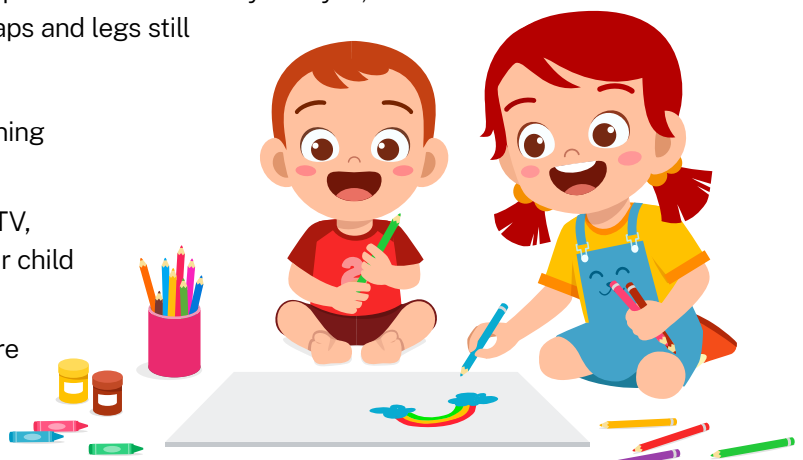
5 to 6 years

What to expect

- Auditory (listening), visual (looking) and physical (whole body) attention is well developed
- Attention can be sustained for listening and other activities

How you can help

- Talk to your child about things that may help us listen: look with your eyes, listen with your ears, lips closed, hands in laps and legs still
- Praise your child for good listening
- Read books to encourage looking and listening at the same time
- Reduce distractions e.g. by turning off the TV, limiting the number of toys available to your child
- If your child struggles to finish an activity, gently encourage one more turn or one more page to help them to attend a little longer



Hearing

Good hearing is essential for communication development.

Most infants have their hearing screened at birth as part of the Statewide Infant Screening – Hearing (SWISH) program. Your child may require a further hearing test to pick up conductive hearing loss which is common in young children. Conductive hearing loss is also 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 every 3 young children will have undetected conductive hearing loss at some stage. Children under 2 years of age are at greatest risk of conductive hearing loss. Children between the ages of 2 and 8 are also at risk.
- A conductive hearing loss can fluctuate. The degree of loss can vary and the hearing loss can appear, disappear and reappear.

Your GP or local community health centre can provide information on hearing tests.



School Readiness Skills

Language

What language skills will be expected at school?

- **Talking & Listening:** Children will talk to other people about their interests, ask and answer simple questions, follow simple directions, make their needs known, join in familiar songs and join in discussions about books. A large vocabulary is a strong predictor of school success.
- **Maths:** Children should be familiar with numbers and counting, use number concept words (e.g. many, a lot, more, less) and have an understanding of position and time concepts (e.g. up/down, front/back, day/night).
- **Social:** Children should know their name and address, start and complete tasks, sit and listen to stories, share, take turns, and participate in imaginative play.
- **Reading:** Children will develop their vocabulary to include terms such as 'words', 'sounds' and 'letters'.

Some ideas to develop language skills for school:

- Establish routines with your child to prepare them for a more structured school day. On a 'home day', make a daily routine that includes talking time, drawing, reading time, and set mealtimes (e.g. morning tea, lunch).
- Involve your child in lots of talking and listening:
 - Ask open ended questions to encourage your child to express their own ideas. A question like 'Tell me about the party' provides your child with more opportunity to give a longer answer than 'Did you have fun at the party?'
 - Play word games to develop listening and vocabulary, e.g. 'I'm thinking of an animal that lives on a farm, is pink, has 4 legs and has a curly tail. What is it?', 'Tell me 5 things you think of when I say the word... pirate?' (e.g. treasure, eye-patch, boat, parrot, sword), explain why words go together (e.g. 'Why do moon and stars go together?' Because they are in the sky at night time).
 - Use thinking words in your own speech, e.g. 'I've decided to cook scrambled eggs', 'I remember...', 'I thought you wanted juice'.
 - When reading to your child, stop and talk about what is happening in the story, 'predict' what might happen next (e.g. 'I think the boy might...'), and talk about which part of the story you like best.
 - Re-read familiar stories and help your child retell or act out the story.

Print Awareness

Some ideas to develop print awareness skills for school:

- Talk to your child about books and point out the letters, words, and sentences.
- Let your child hold the book, turn the pages and follow the words from left to right.
- Help your child make their own books. Cut out pictures or let them draw their own. Your child can tell you the words they want you to write down.
- Help your child develop an awareness that sentences are made up of words.
- Point out street signs to your child and talk about what they say e.g. 'stop'



Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is the knowledge of sounds in spoken language. It is made up of many skills including an awareness of sounds, syllables, words and rhyme. These skills develop in the preschool years and are important for early literacy development.

Some ideas to develop phonological awareness skills for school:

- Talk about the beginning sounds in familiar names and objects e.g. 'fish' starts with 'ffff', just like your name 'Fred'.
- Make up silly sentences or names using the same first sound (alliteration). For example, 'Jenny's Jumping, Tickling Tara, Sally's Sitting, Happy Hayden'.
- Play 'I spy' with first sounds (not letters) e.g. I spy with my little eye, something beginning with 'mmm'.
- Sound bucket game: pull out an object and say the sound it starts with. Think of another word that begins with the same sound or find objects that begin with the same sound.
- Sound table: collect items that start with a certain sound. Put them together on a little table and talk about the sound they start with. You could add to them across the week. The following week you could try a different sound.
- Highlight rhyming words in nursery rhymes, songs and in books (e.g. Row row row your boat – 'stream' and 'dream' rhyme).
- Develop an awareness of syllables by clapping out each part of the word e.g. 'butterfly' can be 'bu-tter-fly.' Family members' names are a great place to start (e.g. Chris-to-pher). You can also put objects in a bag, pull out one at a time and ask your child to clap out the beats in that word e.g. peg (1 syllable), tiger (2 syllables – ti-ger), helicopter (4 syllables – he-li-cop-ter).

Other

It is important to:


- Contact your local school about their Transition to School and Orientation Programs prior to starting Kindergarten.
- Share information about your child's previous therapy or support with the school.


How to refer your child to Speech Pathology

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

A doctor's 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