

Speech & Language Developmental Milestones for Children

How do speech and language develop?

The first 3 years of life, when the brain is developing and maturing, is the most intensive period for acquiring speech and language skills. These skills develop best in a world that is rich with sounds, sights, and consistent exposure to the speech and language of others.

There appear to be critical periods for speech and language development in infants and young children when the brain is best able to absorb language. If these critical periods are allowed to pass without exposure to language, it will be more difficult to learn.

What are the milestones for speech and language development?

The first signs of communication occur when an infant learns that a cry will bring food, comfort, and companionship. Newborns also begin to recognize important sounds in their environment, such as the voice of their mother or primary caretaker. As they grow, babies begin to sort out the speech sounds that compose the words of their language. By 6 months of age, most babies recognize the basic sounds of their native language.

Children vary in their development of speech and language skills. However, they follow a natural progression or timetable for mastering the skills of language. A checklist of milestones for the normal development of speech and language skills in children from birth to 5 years of age is included below. These milestones help doctors and other health professionals determine if a child is on track or if he or she may need extra help. Sometimes a delay may be caused by hearing loss, while other times it may be due to a speech or language disorder.

Your baby's hearing and communicative development checklist

Birth to 3 Months

Reacts to loud sounds

YES NO

Calms down or smiles when spoken to

YES NO

Recognizes your voice and calms down if crying

YES NO

When feeding, starts or stops sucking in response to sound

YES NO

Coos and makes pleasure sounds

YES NO

Has a special way of crying for different needs

YES NO

Smiles when he or she sees you

YES NO

4 to 6 Months

Follows sounds with his or her eyes

YES NO

Responds to changes in the tone of your voice

YES NO

Notices toys that make sounds

YES NO

Pays attention to music

YES NO

Babbles in a speech-like way and uses many different sounds, including sounds that begin with p, b, and m

YES NO

Laughs

YES NO

Babbles when excited or unhappy

YES NO

Makes gurgling sounds when alone or playing with you

YES NO

7 Months to 1 Year

Enjoys playing peek-a-boo and pat-a-cake

YES NO

Turns and looks in the direction of sounds

YES NO

Listens when spoken to

YES NO

Understands words for common items such as “cup,” “shoe,” or “juice”

YES NO

Responds to requests (“Come here” or “Want more?”)

YES NO

Babbles using long and short groups of sounds (“tata, upup, bibibi”)

YES NO

Babbles to get and keep attention

YES NO

Communicates using gestures such as waving or holding up arms

YES NO

Imitates different speech sounds

YES NO

Has one or two words (“Hi,” “dog,” “Dada,” or “Mama”) by first birthday

YES NO

1 to 2 Years

Knows a few parts of the body and can point to them when asked

YES NO

Follows simple commands (“Roll the ball”) and understands simple questions (“Where’s your shoe?”)

YES NO

Enjoys simple stories, songs, and rhymes

YES NO

Points to pictures, when named, in books

YES NO

Acquires new words on a regular basis

YES NO

Uses some one- or two-word questions (“Where kitty?” or “Go bye-bye?”)

YES NO

Puts two words together (“More cookie” or “No juice”)

YES NO

Uses many different consonant sounds at the beginning of words

YES NO

2 to 3 Years

Has a word for almost everything

YES NO

Uses two- or three-word phrases to talk about and ask for things

YES NO

Uses k, g, f, t, d, and n sounds

YES NO

Speaks in a way that is understood by family members and friends

YES NO

Names objects to ask for them or to direct attention to them

YES NO

3 to 4 Years

Hears you when you call from another room

YES NO

Hears the television or radio at the same sound level as other family members

YES NO

Answers simple “Who?” “What?” “Where?” and “Why?” questions

YES NO

Talks about activities at daycare, preschool, or friends’ homes

YES NO

Uses sentences with four or more words

YES NO

Speaks easily without having to repeat syllables or words

YES NO

This checklist is based upon *How Does Your Child Hear and Talk*, courtesy of the American Speech–Language–Hearing Association.

What should I do if my child's speech or language appears to be delayed?

Talk to your child's doctor if you have any concerns. Your doctor may refer you to a speech-language pathologist, who is a health professional trained to evaluate and treat people with speech or language disorders. The speech-language pathologist will talk to you about your child's communication and general development. He or she will also use special spoken tests to evaluate your child. A hearing test is often included in the evaluation because a hearing problem can affect speech and language development. Depending on the result of the evaluation, the speech-language pathologist may suggest activities you can do at home to stimulate your child's development. They might also recommend group or individual therapy or suggest further evaluation by an audiologist (a health care professional trained to identify and measure hearing loss), or a developmental psychologist (a health care professional with special expertise in the psychological development of infants and children).

For children under age 3 years these evaluations typically fall under Early Intervention Services in your community. For children ages 3 years and over, your community school system is your usual resource. TeamstersCare Audiology services are available to eligible dependents age 3 years and over.

Source: National Institute of Health: National Institute on Deafness and other Communication Disorders