

# Language development: an amazing journey

Language development in children is amazing, and it's a development that many parents really look forward to. The secret to helping your child learn language is very simple: talk together lots and listen lots.

## Language development in children: what you need to know

Although the **first year is really important** for language development in children, major learning continues throughout a child's early years. And learning language is a lifelong process.

In their first 12 months, babies develop many of the foundations that underpin speech and language development. For the first three years or so, children understand a lot more than they can say.

*Language development supports your child's ability to communicate, and express and understand feelings. It also supports thinking and problem-solving, and developing and maintaining relationships. Learning to understand, use and enjoy language is the critical first step in literacy, and the basis for learning to read and write.*

## How to encourage your child's language development

The best way to encourage your child's speech and language development is to **talk together frequently and naturally**.

### Talking with your baby

Talk to your baby and treat her as a talker, beginning in her first year. Assume she's talking back to you when she makes sounds and babbles, even when she's just paying attention to you. When you finish talking, give her a turn and wait for her to respond – she will!

When your baby starts babbling, babble back with similar sounds. You'll probably find that he babbles back to you. This keeps the talking going and is great fun!

### Responding to your baby

As your baby grows up and starts to use gestures and words, respond to her attempts to communicate. For example, if your child shakes her head, treat that behaviour as if she's saying 'No'. If she points to a toy, respond as if your child is saying, 'Can I have that?' or 'I like that'.

When you tune in and respond to your child, it encourages him to communicate. You'll be amazed at how much he has to say, even before his words develop.

### **Everyday talking**

Talk about what's happening. Talk to your baby even if she doesn't understand – she soon will. Talk about things that make sense to her, but at the same time remember to use lots of different words.

As your baby becomes a toddler, keep talking to him – tell him the things that you're doing, and talk about the things that he's doing.

From the time your child starts telling stories, encourage her to **talk about things in the past and in the future**. At the end of the day, talk about plans for the next day – for example, making the weekly shopping list together or deciding what to take on a visit to grandma. Similarly, when you come home from a shared outing, talk about it.

### **Introducing new words**

It's important for children to be continually exposed to lots of different words in lots of different contexts. This helps them learn the meaning and function of words in their world.

### **Reading with your baby**

[Read and share books](#) with your baby and keep using more complex books as he grows. Talk about the pictures. Use a variety of books and link what's in the book to what's happening in your child's life. Books with interesting pictures are a great focus for talking.

Read aloud with your child and point to words as you say them. This shows your child the link between written and spoken words, and that words are distinct parts of language. These are important concepts for [developing literacy](#).

Your local library is a great source of new books.

### **Following your child's lead**

If your child starts a conversation through talking, gesture or behaviour, respond to it, making sure you stick to the topic your child started.

You can also **repeat and build on what your child says**. For example, if she says, 'Apple,' you can say, 'You want an apple. You want a red apple. I want a red apple too. Let's have a red apple together'.

### **Language development: the first six years**

Here are just a few of the important things your child might achieve in language development between three months and six years.

#### **3-12 months**

In this period, your baby will most likely coo and laugh, play with sounds and begin to communicate with gestures. Babbling is an important developmental stage during the first year and, for many children, words are starting to form by around 12 months.

Babbling is often followed by the 'jargon phase' where your child will produce unintelligible strings of sounds, often with a conversation-like tone. This makes his babbling sound meaningful.

First words also begin **by around 12 months**. Babbling, jargon and new words might appear together as your child's first words continue to emerge.

Find out more about [language development from 3-12 months](#).

### **12-18 months**

During this time, first words usually appear (these one-word utterances are rich with meaning). In the following months, babies continue to add more words to their vocabulary. Babies can understand more than they say, though, and will be able to follow simple instructions. In fact your baby can understand you when you say 'No' – although she won't always obey!

If your baby isn't babbling and isn't using gestures by 12 months, talk to your GP, child and family health nurse or other health professional.

### **18 months to 2 years**

In his second year, your toddler's vocabulary has grown and he'll start to put two words together into short 'sentences'. He'll understand much of what's said to him, and you'll be able to understand what he says to you (most of the time!).

Language development varies hugely, but if your baby doesn't have some words by around 18 months, talk to your GP, child and family health nurse or other health professional.

Find out more about [language development from 1-2 years](#).

### **2-3 years**

Your child will be able to speak in longer, more complex sentences, and use a greater variety of speech sounds more accurately when she speaks. She might play and talk at the same time. Strangers will probably be able to understand most of what she says by the time she's three.

Find out more about [language development from 2-3 years](#).

### **3-5 years**

Now your child is a preschooler, you can expect longer, more abstract and complex conversations. He'll probably also want to talk about a wide range of topics, and his vocabulary will continue to grow. He might well show that he understands the basic rules of grammar, as he experiments with more complex sentences. And you can look forward to some entertaining stories too.

Find out more about [language development from 3-4 years](#) and [language development from 4-5 years](#).

## 5-6 years

During the early school years, your child will learn more words and start to understand how the sounds within language work together. She'll also become a better storyteller, as she learns to put words together in a variety of ways and build different types of sentences.

*Children grow and develop at different rates, and no child exactly fits a description of a particular age. In each area of development things happen in a fairly predictable order, but there's also a wide variation in what's 'normal'. If you have any concerns, ask your child and family health nurse, GP or paediatrician or see a speech pathologist.*

## Speech and language: what's the difference?

**Speech** means producing the sounds that form words. It's a physical activity that is controlled by the brain. Speech requires coordinated, precise movement from the tongue, lips, jaw, palate, lungs and voice box.

Making these precise movements takes a lot of practice, and that's what children do in the first 12 months. Children learn to correctly make speech sounds as they develop, with some sounds taking more time than others.

**Language** is the words that your child understands and uses as well as how he uses them. Language includes spoken and written language. The parts that make up language include vocabulary, grammar and discourse:

- **Vocabulary** is the store of words a person has – like a dictionary held in long-term memory.
- **Grammar**, or syntax, is a set of rules about the order in which words should be used in sentences. These rules are learned through the experience of language.
- **Discourse** is a language skill that we use to structure sentences into conversations, tell stories, poems and jokes, and for writing recipes or letters.

Reference:

[http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/language\\_development.html](http://raisingchildren.net.au/articles/language_development.html)