

Preschool Speech and Language Development – Birth to 5 Years

Information for parents of children, newborn through preschool.

Babies learn to talk by listening to voices and sounds. Since babies develop at different rates, it is often hard to detect if your infant or toddler has a speech or language problem. If you suspect a problem, talk to a Registered Speech-Language Pathologist. Even children under the age of two can be helped with speech and language development. Untreated speech and language difficulties can affect behavior, social interaction and future academic success. **Early detection is vital!**

Speech and Language Development

Milestones	Warning Signs
<p>Birth - 3 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◊ startled by loud noises ◊ soothed by calm, gentle voices ◊ likes to cuddle and enjoys being held ◊ cries, gurgles, grunts, says “ah” ◊ sucks and swallows well 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⚠ Your baby does not react to sounds.
<p>4 - 6 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◊ watches your face when you talk ◊ tries to “talk” with you by cooing or babbling ◊ enjoys “talking” with you and smiles at you ◊ coos and squeals for attention ◊ has a special cry when hungry 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⚠ Your baby does not respond to your smiles and interactions.
<p>6 months - 1 year</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◊ understands some common words when used with gestures, such as their name, “bye-bye”, “up” and “give me” ◊ copies gestures (e.g., waving bye-bye) ◊ mimics different speech sounds, like “oh oh” and “wheee” ◊ babbles using a variety of different sounds, such as “bababa dididi upup bupbupbup” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⚠ Your child does not babble or try to talk. ⚠ Your child has stopped babbling. ⚠ Your child has had several ear infections.
<p>1 year - 18 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◊ understands simple questions/statements such as “Where is your nose?” and “Give me” ◊ nods “yes” and shakes head for “no” ◊ points to show interest in something or to ask for something ◊ takes part in imaginative play, such as pretending to go to sleep or putting toy phone to ear ◊ babbles using a variety of sounds which, when put together, sound like real sentences ◊ says a few words, although they may not be clear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ⚠ Your child does not talk at all. ⚠ Your child does not interact with others.



18 months - 2 years

- ◇ understands simple questions, such as “Where is mommy/daddy?” and “Where is your shoe?”
- ◇ understands simple directions (e.g., “Get your blanket”)
- ◇ understands more words than he/she can say
- ◇ makes requests (e.g., food, toys)
- ◇ says some two-word sentences, such as “more juice,” “no night-night,” “daddy car”
- ◇ says “whatssat” a lot at about age two

- ❗ Your child does not talk or uses more gestures than words.
- ❗ Your child does not appear to understand simple directions.

Age 2 - 3 years

- ◇ answers simple questions, such as “What’s your name?” and “Which one is the big doll?”
- ◇ follows simple directions (e.g., “Put the teddy bear to bed”)
- ◇ puts a toy “in”, “on” and “under” when asked
- ◇ has a word for almost everything
- ◇ uses two- to three-word “sentences” to talk about and ask for things (e.g., “That my truck”, “Puppy eat cookie”, “Doggy kiss me”)

- ❗ Your child shows frustration when trying to talk.
- ❗ Your child’s speech is difficult for you to understand.
- ❗ Your child does not yet put two words together.
- ❗ Your child stutters.

Age 3 - 4 years

- ◇ understands questions about a picture story (e.g., “Where did the bunny go?”)
- ◇ follows two related directions such as “Close the book and give it to me”
- ◇ gives directions (e.g., “Fix this for me”)
- ◇ uses a lot of sentences that have four or more words
- ◇ asks many questions, like “what”, “where” and “why”

- ❗ Your child’s speech is difficult for strangers to understand.
- ❗ Your child has difficulty playing imaginary games with others.
- ❗ Your child stutters.

Age 4 - 5 years

- ◇ follows three related directions, such as “Get your crayons, make a picture and put it on the counter”
- ◇ understands concepts such as “top,” “bottom,” “beside” and “behind”
- ◇ tells stories and shares ideas about recent events
- ◇ explains the meanings of words when asked
- ◇ says most sounds correctly (except for l, r, th, ch, sh)

- ❗ Your child does not use complete and grammatically correct sentences.
- ❗ Your child stutters.
- ❗ Your child does not seem to be able to follow directions.

Talking Tips

- Ensure face to face communication when your child is talking.
- Describe what your child is doing, feeling, and learning.
- Share books with your child. Comment on and ask questions about the pictures and relate the story to your child's world.
- Recite nursery rhymes and sing songs.
- Use words and sentences that match your child's level.
- Talk to your child during routines (e.g., mealtimes, bathing, dressing).
- Talk simply and clearly.
- Repeat words frequently.
- Seek out opportunities for your child to interact with other children his/her age.
- Limit screen time. Chonchaiya and Pruksananonda (2008) found that children who started to watch television before 12 months of age, and who watched more than 2 hours of television each day, were six times more likely to have language delays.



Early detection of difficulties at any age can make learning to talk easier. If your child shows any of the warning signs listed for his or her age group, contact a Registered Speech-Language Pathologist.

For more information on setting your child up for a literate life please visit our [Developing Reading and Writing Skills](#) information sheet.

If you are a parent of an English language learner (ELL), see our [English Language Learner \(ELL\)](#) information sheet.

Information Gathered from:

Chonchaiya, W., & Pruksandanonda, C. (2008). Television viewing associates with language development. *Acta Paediatrica*, 97(7), 977–982.
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Getting Help

If you suspect a problem, consult a Registered Speech-Language Pathologist (R.SLP). To find a practitioner:

- Contact HEALTH LINK - Health Advice 24/7 at 8-1-1 or visit: www.MyHealth.Alberta.ca
- Enquire at a Public Health Centre or your child's school.
- Find a private practice SLP:
 - Search the Yellow Pages
 - Contact the Alberta Speech-Language Association of Private Practitioners (ASAPP) website at www.asapp.ca.



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