

Information for parents

Young children learning to communicate and to talk

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Learning to talk is one of the most fascinating and important aspects of your child's development. Helping your child learn this skill can be an important role that you play. However, sometimes this does not always go according to plan, and there may be occasions when your child does not seem to be talking as well as his or her peers. Often problems that parents feel exist may just be related to the child's age and stage of development. However, if you are concerned about your child's speech or language development, please check with your family doctor or an Early Childhood Centre.

Whether your child is making unusual sounds, few sounds, or does not want to talk to people outside the family group, the following suggestions may be of assistance. Often problems that parents feel exist may just be related to the child's age and stage of development.

There is more to communication than just talking. Communication is a two-way process. There needs to be a sender and a receiver if true communication is to take place. When we communicate we also need to take into account all the non-verbal signals we send out. The way we stand, or fold our arms, or tilt our head, are all

non-verbal ways of sending messages to other people about how we are feeling.

Parents need to understand the terms used in communication. Parents are still the most important people in helping a child to talk and, together with teachers, can show a child how to use language creatively and imaginatively. You need to talk to your child from the moment he or she is born. Your role in encouraging good communication is never really over.

The main terms that people use when talking about communication and language include the following:

- Speech – forming and sequencing the sounds of the oral language being spoken

- Articulation – speaking clearly so speech can be understood
- Phonology - the sounds of speech or their articulation
- Vocabulary – the words used in a language
- Language – a way of arranging a person's vocabulary
- Communication – communicates desires and ideas through words and pictures and also through other non-verbal means
- Receptive language - the input system of the language, the comprehension of language
- Expressive language – the ability to express language, through both speech and writing
- Grammar – the relationship between words, either written or spoken, in the language being used
- Syntax – the structure of the sentence or the rules of grammar
- Semantics – the meaning of words in the context of a sentence
- Sentence - a number of words containing a verb that make sense when put together.

If your child is not an efficient talker, do not blame yourself. There may be a number of factors that exist that may mean your child needs assistance with this skill. There are several physical reasons why a child may be slow to talk. One could be that your child has a hearing loss and may not hear the sound of your voice. If your child has a cleft palate, this may affect his or her speech development. Some children appear to hear sounds and words, but may confuse one sound with another sound. If you have any concerns about your child's speech development or his or her ability to communicate with others in his or her immediate environment, please consult your doctor or a speech pathologist.



Parents and primary caregivers need to remember that children develop at individual rates and in their own time. A first-born may start to say clear words at ten months. A second-born child may not talk at all until aged two years or more because the elder sibling is doing it all and the need to talk is simply not there. It would be a dull situation if all children said their first word on their first birthday. Do not put pressure on your child to talk and at all times make learning to talk fun and enjoyable.

Parents should remember that girls often speak at a slightly earlier age than boys do, but that after the first three years this situation is not very noticeable.

Recording your child's speech sounds, first words and conversations onto a tape recorder can provide a useful record of communication development. You can listen to his/her conversation six months earlier and this usually shows you there has been significant improvement in communication skills. Recording a conversation every six months and replaying it so you can listen also tells you how much you talk and how much you listen to your child.

When your child is little and is at the stage of playing with and making sounds and babbling, you need to reinforce these sounds by smiling or repeating the sounds made by your baby or even making some new ones. Children under the age of twelve months usually communicate by crying, babbling, cooing and imitation, in addition to facial expressions, gestures and body language.

It is important to remember that most infants and toddlers can understand and respond to a number of words before they can actually say them. Young children will also make mistakes when using language. This is because they are trying to apply rules they are learning, but these rules do not always work. The best way to respond to these "mistakes" is simply to restate correctly what your child has said.

First words of young children are usually used for:

- Greeting somebody ("Hello", "Hi")
- Telling us what something is ("Book")
- Asking for something ("Drink")
- Asking if that really is the name of something ("Dolly?")
- Giving someone a demand ("Give")
- Giving self a command ("Blow", for example, when blowing own nose or blowing the candles of a birthday cake)
- Denying or refusing something ("No")
- Making a comment about something ("Yum", "Wet")
- Practising (for example, repeating a word over and over to self "car, car, car")
- Building a relationship with someone ("Mummy, kiss, hello").

By the age of twelve months most babies understand what language is all about. They will begin to understand the names of familiar people and objects in their environment. At all times when you have been talking to your child, stop and give him or her time to reply to your conversation. Talk about what you are doing here and now. Words used in context are important. By age one, he or she is also turning when someone has called his or her name.

By this age your child will understand "No" and "Goodbye" and will usually shake his or her head for "no".

By the age of eighteen months your child should have between 10 to 50 words he or she is using. He or she may also have several favourite two-word utterances such as "no go", "want drink" or "Daddy car". Your child will point to three or four body parts if asked, either on his or her body or on a favourite toy.

By two years of age, his or her vocabulary will be advancing on a daily basis and your child will enjoy naming everything near by. He or she will recognise many common objects and pictures in the environment and will follow a simple direction.

Three year olds will use telegraphic speech such as "Daddy gone big plane", similar in syntax to Creole and pidgin languages used in many island communities. Most speech has become creative and not just imitative. Your child at this age will be using nouns, verbs, adjectives and some pronouns such as "I", "You", and "Me". He or she can match primary colours and will talk about being cold, sleepy or hungry.

Four year olds will talk to themselves in long monologues and will have a vocabulary of 700 to 1000 words. The average length of a sentence will be three to four words by this age. They understand basic concepts such as tall or short, big or little, hard or soft, hot or cold. They also start to identify shapes such as a circle, a triangle and a square. Four year olds also understand the concept of taking turns and waiting for something. Songs and rhymes are also popular at this age.



By five, most children have speech that is intelligible and their grammar is usually well established. Their vocabulary consists of about 1500 words or more. They enjoy listening to stories and telling stories. They may still confuse fact and fantasy at this age. Five year olds will understand an instruction involving three or four parts and will also have developed a concept of number. They will produce sentences of five to seven words and enjoy answering the telephone correctly and taking a simple message.

At all times remember to talk to and with your child and not at or for your child.

If you take the time to listen and respond to your child, he or she will usually take the time to listen and talk to you.

Reference

Shaw, C. (1998). Talking to your child. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

For more Information

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