

Speech & Language Development



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It's important to discuss early speech and language development, as well as other developmental concerns, with your doctor at every routine well-child visit. It can be difficult to tell whether a child is just immature in his or her ability to communicate or has a problem that requires professional attention.

These developmental norms may provide clues:

Before 12 Months

It's important for kids this age to be watched for signs that they're using their voices to relate to their environment. Cooing and babbling are early stages of speech development. As babies get older (often around 9 months), they begin to string sounds together, incorporate the different tones of speech, and say words like "mama" and "dada" (without really understanding what those words mean). Before 12 months of age, babies also should be attentive to sound and begin to recognize names of common objects (bottle, binky, etc.). Babies who watch intently but don't react to sound may be showing signs of hearing loss.

By 12 to 15 Months

Kids this age should have a wide range of speech sounds in their babbling (like p, b, m, d, or n), begin to imitate and approximate sounds and words modeled by family members, and typically say one or more words (not including "mama" and "dada") spontaneously. Nouns usually come first, like "baby" and "ball." Your child also should be able to understand and follow simple one-step directions ("Please give me the toy," etc.).

From 18 to 24 Months

Though there is a lot of variability, most toddlers are saying about 20 words by 18 months and 50 or more words by the time they turn 2. By age 2, kids are starting to combine two words to make simple sentences, such as "baby crying" or "Daddy big." A 2-year-old should be able to identify common objects (in person and in pictures), points to eyes, ears, or nose when asked, and follow two-step commands ("Please pick up the toy and give it to me," for example). [Continued >>](#)

From 2 to 3 Years

Parents often see huge gains in their child's speech. Your toddler's vocabulary should increase (to too many words to count) and he or she should routinely combine three or more words into sentences. Comprehension also should increase — by 3 years of age, a child should begin to understand what it means to “put it on the table” or “put it under the bed.” Your child also should begin to identify colors and comprehend descriptive concepts (big versus little, for example).

Warning Signs of a Possible Problem

If you're concerned about your child's speech and language development, there are some things to watch for. An infant who isn't responding to sound or who isn't vocalizing is of particular concern.

Between 12 and 24 months, reasons for concern include a child who:

- isn't using gestures, such as pointing or waving bye-bye, by 12 months
- prefers gestures over vocalizations to communicate at 18 months
- has trouble imitating sounds by 18 months
- has difficulty understanding simple verbal requests

Seek an evaluation if a child over 2 years old:

- can only imitate speech or actions and doesn't produce words or phrases spontaneously
- says only certain sounds or words repeatedly and can't use oral language to communicate more than his or her immediate needs
- can't follow simple directions
- has an unusual tone of voice (such as raspy or nasal sounding)
- is more difficult to understand than expected for his or her age. Parents and regular caregivers should understand about half of a child's speech at 2 years and about three quarters at 3 years. By 4 years old, a child should be mostly understood, even by people who don't know the child.

To learn more about how Siskin Children's Institute can help you find answers visit, siskin.org.

