

PARENTING BABIES, TODDLERS AND YOUNG CHILDREN

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.

Learning to talk is one of the most difficult and important steps that young children take. It helps them to make sense of the world, to ask for what they need and to be able to get on with other people. If you think about how difficult it is for adults to learn a different language you can get some idea of what it is like for an infant to learn to speak from having no language at all.

Language and speech, like other development, take place at different rates for different children. The steps below give some guidelines.

The language examples are all related to English. If you usually speak another language with your child, the sounds and words will differ but most stages of development will be similar.

Steps in learning to talk

The early months

Long before they can speak, babies are listening to their parents and carers. They begin to make little noises and sounds which come before speech. If parents and carers imitate these, it is as if they are talking to the baby. This is the beginning of your baby learning to talk.

By responding to your baby's needs when she cries, you show that you have heard her and that she matters. This is the beginning of communication.

Eight to 12 months

- The early little noises turn into babbling for example, 'Da-da-dada' and 'Ma-ma-ma-ma'.
- Babies are beginning to learn what some simple words mean even though they cannot say them, for example, 'Mummy, Bottle, No'.
- There may be one or two single words.
- Babies wave 'Bye-bye' when asked.
- They obey simple requests such as 'Give me the ball'.

12 to 18 months

- There is much babbling in the children's own jargon.
- The first single words appear for example, 'No, Dad, Dog'.
- Children can point to things that they know when they are asked to.
- Children know their own names and respond to them.

18 months to two years

- 18-month-olds can know and use six or more words.
- Two-year-olds may have 100 or more words. Many of the words may be unclear but the parent or carer can tell what is meant.
- Two-year-olds can say their name.
- They can ask for simple things that they need, for example, 'Drink'.
- Children start to join words together, for example, 'Daddy home', 'All gone'.
- They copy the last part of sentences.
- They try out different speech sounds and make mistakes.

Three to four years

- Children begin to ask 'What?' and 'Why?' questions.
- Use sentences with three or four words.
- They begin to separate the truth from make-believe.
- They can talk about 'Yesterday, now and tomorrow' and know what they mean.
- Their speech should be understandable most of the time.
- They are likely to talk to themselves as they do things.
- They can learn and join in simple rhymes and songs.



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Steps in learning to talk *continued*

Four to five years

- Children learn to adjust their language to the situation they are in. For example, they talk differently to their parents than they do to their friends.
- They ask 'When?' questions.
- They can talk about imaginary situations, for example, 'I hope ...'
- They still mix truth and make-believe.
- They like to tell stories.
- They can hold conversations with their friends and parents.
- They will be able to say their name, age and address if they have been taught this.
- Four-year-olds enjoy making up words for fun and using toilet words, for example, 'Poo', 'Bum'.
- Their speech is clearer but they still may not be using 'th', 'r', 'z', 's', and 'v'.

What parents can do

- Talk to your baby right from birth and imitate her sounds.
- Name things and talk about what you are doing. Use simple words and sentences at first.
- Have conversations with your child at some stage every day.
- Listen with interest when your child is talking to you. Don't interfere or correct your child's speech.
- Answer questions simply and clearly.
- Allow your child time to get out what she wants to say.
- Talk about pictures in books, and name things in the pictures.
- Sing songs and read rhymes.
- Take your children to the local library and read some stories to them. Then you can borrow or buy the ones that they particularly enjoy.
- Give a younger child a chance to talk without being interrupted by older brothers and sisters.
- If your child is stumbling over words because he is excited suggest that he tell you slowly. Then listen to him carefully.
- Get down to eye level with your child when teaching a new word so he can see your lips and hear the word clearly.
- For children with a severe hearing loss, it is most important that their hearing loss is recognised before six months of age.

Be concerned if your child:

- does not react to loud noises by the time she is one month old
- does not turn her head to a noise or voice by three months of age. Hearing problems often cause speech difficulties
- does not start to make single sounds, for example, 'Ba ba' by eight or nine months
- does not babble or make other sounds when someone talks to her by 12 months
- is not starting to say single words by 12 months
- does not understand simple instructions by two years
- frequently repeats sounds or part-words, for example, 'Wh-wh-where's my ba-ba-ball?'
- lengthens sounds or gets stuck on words, for example, 'M-m-m-m' or 'Da-a-a-a-ad'
- is embarrassed or worried when speaking.

If you have any concerns at any stage about your child's speech, talk to your local child health nurse or your doctor. Your child may need to see a speech pathologist (through local community health centres, hospitals that provide services for children, or privately).

Reminders

- Language development needs listening and talking.
- Use simple language.
- Sit or kneel down so you are on your child's level when she is talking to you.
- Spend time reading simple stories and rhymes, looking at picture books and singing songs.
- Help your child to notice road signs and billboards.
- Learning language is important. It should also be fun.

Learning to talk in more than one language

Dr Mandy Scott, Convenor,
Canberra Languages Forum

Bilingual children

Growing up speaking more than one language is common in most parts of the world and in many Australian families.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2006 census, over 18 per cent of residents of the Canberra-Queanbeyan region speak a language other than English at home.

Far from this causing a problem, most research indicates that learning more than one language at a young age has a number of benefits. These include:

- A greater understanding of how languages work. This helps general language development, including literacy.
- More creative and flexible thinking. Bilingual children can 'think outside the square' because they are accustomed to using different ways to think about the same idea or problem.
- Cultural and social sensitivity. Learning different languages and when and how they are used develops social and cultural awareness.

Myths about biligualism

There are many myths about bilingualism.

Myth: delays in language are caused by learning a second language.

Truth: This is not true. Like any other child, a child who is bilingual can have language delays, but learning a second language neither increases nor decreases the chances of having a language delay.

Myth: it is easier to learn a second language if you stop using your first or home language and concentrate on the new language.

Truth: The truth is that the stronger the first language is, the easier it is to learn a second language.

Myth: parents should stop using the first or home language when the child begins speaking a second language such as English.

Truth: In fact, the best way for families to support children learning English is to maintain the child's first language at home.

You do not have to speak in English to help your child learn English. It is more important for you to use the language that you can use best and are most comfortable speaking. By doing this you can provide models of grammatically correct sentences and access to a wide vocabulary. It can also help if you use the name of the language (for example, Mandarin or Cantonese) when you speak in that language to your child.

What to expect when children are learning a second language

Many children become silent when first exposed to a second language. This silent period can last months and can be important in developing understanding.

It is normal for children who are learning a new language to mix the two languages and to make mistakes.

Children learning English often begin by using short phrases such as 'my turn', 'chase me', 'help me'. They usually find these phrases easy to use and often get positive results.

Just as some children who speak one language have a language delay, some bilingual children can also have a delay.

- If you are concerned about your child's speech development you should seek advice or an assessment.
- There are some bilingual speech pathologists who can assess a child in languages other than English.
- Speech Pathology Australia has a list of private speech pathologists who are bilingual.

Source: Learning Links, Information Sheet 50, 'Supporting bilingual children in early childhood', www.learninglinks.org.au

Contacts

Child and Family Centres (parenting information and support)	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin	6207 0120
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong	6207 8228
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: West Belconnen	6205 2904
healthdirect Australia (free health advice line staffed by registered nurses)	24-hour	1800 022 222
Maternal and Child Health	8am–5pm Monday–Friday	6207 9977
Parentline ACT	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833

Websites

www.censusdata.abs.gov.au	ABS 2006 Census Data
www.cyh.com	Parenting and child health information
www.parentlink.act.gov.au	Other parenting guides, including, More than reading and writing, Self-esteem, Why stories are important
www.raisingchildren.net.au	Raising Children Network—covering topics for parenting newborns to teens
www.zerotothree.com	Information on healthy development of babies and young children

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