

Learning to talk

Learning to talk is one of the most important steps that young children take. It helps them make sense of the world and to get along with other people. Language and speech development starts at birth and progresses quickly through the early years and beyond. As with other learning, it happens at different rates for different children.

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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 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 they cry, you show that you have heard them and that they matter. This is the start of communication.

8–12 months

- The early little noises turn into babbling e.g. 'Da-dada- da' and 'Ma-ma-ma-ma'.
- Babies begin to learn what some simple words mean even though they cannot say them, e.g. 'Mummy', 'Bottle', 'No'.
- There may be one or two single words.
- Babies wave 'Bye-bye' when asked.
- They respond to simple questions, e.g. 'Where's Daddy?'



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Steps in learning to talk *continued*

12–18 months

- There is much babbling in children's own jargon.
- The first single words appear e.g. 'No', 'Dad', 'Dog'.
- Can point to things they know, e.g. objects and body parts and respond to familiar requests, e.g. 'Come here'.
- Children know their own names and respond to them.

18 months to 3 years

- From 18 to 21 months children may use 15 or more words, name some objects and talk more clearly.
- Two year olds can say their name and ask for simple things, e.g. 'Drink'.
- Children may copy the last part of your sentences and try out different speech sounds.
- By two years children start to join two words together, e.g. 'Daddy home', 'All gone', and by two and a half years use short sentences, e.g. 'Look Mummy dog'.
- Two and a half year olds realise language can get others to respond.

3 to 4 years

- Children begin to ask what, where, who, when and why questions, and understand what, where and who.
- They use sentences with three or four words.
- They begin to separate truth from make-believe.
- 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.



Learning to talk is important and should be fun. The best thing parents can do is talk with babies and young children often.

4 to 5 years

- Children learn to adjust their language to the situation, e.g. talking differently to their parents than they do to their friends.
- By four years children should have over 1500 words and use sentences of at least four or five words.

- They can talk about imaginary situations e.g. 'I hope...'
- They still mix truth and make-believe and like to tell stories.
- They can say their name, age and address if they have been taught this. They understand colours and shapes.
- Four year olds enjoy making up words for fun and using toilet words, e.g. 'Poo', 'Bum'.
- Their speech is clearer but they still may not be using 'th', 'r', 'z', 's', or 'v'.



What parents can do

- Talk to your baby right from birth and imitate their sounds.
- Name things and talk about what you are doing. Use simple words and sentences at first with an emphasis on key words.
- Have conversations with your child every day.
- Listen with interest when they talk to you. Don't interfere or correct their speech. Don't let older brothers or sisters interrupt.
- Answer questions simply and clearly.
- Allow your child time to get out what they want to say. If they are stumbling over words suggest they tell you slowly — then listen carefully.
- Sing songs and read stories or rhymes with enthusiasm. Talk about the pictures and name things in them.
- Take your child to the local library and read stories to them — borrow or buy books they really enjoy.
- Get down to eye level with your child when teaching a new word so they can see your lips and hear the word clearly. Be at their level when they are talking to you.

Be concerned if your child

- does not react to loud noises by one month old
- does not turn their head to a noise or voice by four to seven months
- does not start to make single sounds, e.g. 'ba ba' by eight or nine months
- does not babble or make other sounds when someone talks to them by twelve months
- is not starting to say single words by twelve months
- does not understand simple instructions by two years
- frequently repeats sounds or part-words, e.g. 'Wh-wh-where's my ba-ba-ball?'
- lengthens sounds or gets stuck on words, e.g. 'm-m-m-m' or da-a-a-ad'
- is embarrassed or worried when speaking.

If you are concerned about your child's speech, talk to your child health nurse or your doctor.

Make sure they have had their hearing checked. Hearing problems often cause speech difficulties.

Your child may need to see a speech pathologist.

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