

BACK TO BASICS

Language delays and impairments

Language helps children learn new ideas, recall information, share thoughts, and solve problems. Infants and toddlers use gestures, body language, and sounds to communicate needs, ideas, and feelings. Through interactions with people and things, they learn to imitate language sounds—and develop speech communication skills. Most children acquire these skills informally through conversations with others. Gradually—and with practice—they improve articulation, increase vocabulary, lengthen sentences, and learn language rules.

Some children, however, don't learn language easily and need special help. Some have hearing impairments and cannot receive auditory stimuli from the environment. Others are able to hear but cannot interpret sounds. The ability to hear and understand sounds in the environment is *receptive* language. Receptive language skills enable children to associate new information—words, images, and experiences—with things they already know.

Expressive language skills—the ability to speak or gesture to communicate—develop after a child can hear and understand sounds. Children with *expressive* language impairments have difficulty using words and sentences according to language rules.

Support for infants and toddlers

- Talk to babies. Make eye contact and tell stories, sing songs, read books, and describe actions.
- Hold babies so they can see your face. Play mouth games that encourage imitation.
- Play with sounds. Make up games that help babies identify the sources of sounds.
- Encourage babies to vocalize. Imitate their sounds. Taking turns introduces babies to listen-and-respond conversations. A quick response will encourage babies to produce more frequent and complex sounds.
- Provide materials that children can explore with all their senses. Talk about the experiences.

Support for preschoolers

- Use concrete words (nouns and verbs like *book*, *block*, *eat*, *dig*, and *run*) that children can experience with their senses.
- Use pictures, gestures, objects, and other visual cues to help children understand a concept. Watch children's faces and responses to see if they understand a concept or direction.
- Be a good speech model. Establish eye contact and speak in a clear, calm, expressive voice. Avoid baby talk, yelling across a room, and talking too fast. Never mimic or tease a child who has misspoken.
- Talk with—not at—children. Conversation gives children the opportunity to practice both receptive and expressive language skills.
- Avoid constant background music that is distracting to children, muffles their conversations, and encourages everyone to speak louder to be heard above the sound.
- Talk about what you see, describe activities, and name objects and actions. Encourage children to express themselves using words and gestures such as pointing.

Identify children with impairments

All children develop at their own rates. You'll see a range of speech skills within any group of children, especially toddlers and young preschoolers. Review a chart of developmental milestones—a description of typical language skills and abilities at different ages. Watch for behaviors that could be developmental red flags, such as children who:

- act as if they can't hear or understand you. They don't turn their heads to face the source of a sound or voice, say "huh" often, or cannot follow directions as easily as others in the group.
- repeat what others say as if words are memorized and being echoed.
- have small or limited vocabularies that don't expand at expected rates.
- construct sentences that lag behind developmental milestones. Examples include misusing pronouns ("Me go now") and prepositions ("I throw the ball on you") or leaving out words or putting them in the wrong order ("Time doll me").
- express themselves with difficulty, in ways that are hard to understand.
- have trouble recalling the names of people and things they know well.

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Activities to Encourage Speech and Language Development

BIRTH TO 2 YEARS

- Encourage your baby to make vowel-like and consonant-vowel sounds such as "ma," "da," and "ba."
- Reinforce attempts by maintaining eye contact, responding with speech, and imitating vocalizations using different patterns and emphasis. For example, raise the pitch of your voice to indicate a question.
- Imitate your baby's laughter and facial expressions.
- Teach your baby to imitate your actions, including clapping you hands, throwing kisses, and playing finger games such as pat-a-cake, peek-a-boo, and the itsy-bitsy-spider.
- Talk as you bathe, feed, and dress your baby. Talk about what you are doing, where you are going, what you will do when you arrive, and who and what you will see.
- Identify colors, count items.
- Use gestures such as waving goodbye to help convey meaning.
- Acknowledge the attempt to communicate.
- Expand on single words your baby uses: "Here is Mama. Mama loves you. Where is baby? Here is baby."
- Read to your child. Sometimes "reading" is simply describing the pictures in a book without following the written words. Choose books that are sturdy and have large colorful pictures that are not too detailed. Ask your child, "What's this?" and encourage naming and pointing to familiar objects in the book.

2 TO 4 YEARS

- Use good speech that is clear and simple for your child to model.
- Repeat what your child says indicating that you understand. Build and expand on what was said. "Want juice? I have juice. I have apple juice. Do you want apple juice?"
- Use baby talk only if needed to convey the message and when accompanied by the adult word. "It is time for din-din. We will have dinner now."
- Make a scrapbook of favorite or familiar things by cutting out pictures. Group them into categories, such as things to ride on, things to eat, things for dessert, fruits, things to play with. Create silly pictures by mixing and matching pictures. Glue a picture of a dog behind the wheel of a car. Talk about what is wrong with the picture and ways to "fix" it. Count items pictured in the book.
- Help your child understand and ask questions. Play the yes-no game. Ask questions such as "Are you a boy?" "Are you Marty?" "Can a pig fly?" Encourage your child to make up questions and try to fool you.
- Ask questions that require a choice. "Do you want an apple or an orange?" "Do you want to wear your red or blue shirt?"
- Expand vocabulary. Name body parts, and identify what you do with them. "This is my nose. I can smell flowers, brownies, popcorn, and soap."
- Sing simple songs and recite nursery rhymes to show the rhythm and pattern of speech.
- Place familiar objects in a container. Have your child remove the object and tell you what it is called and how to use it. "This is my ball. I bounce it. I play with it."
- Use photographs of familiar people and places and retell what happened or make up a new story.

4 TO 6 YEARS

- When your child starts a conversation, give your full attention whenever possible.
- Make sure that you have your child's attention before you speak.
- Acknowledge, encourage, and praise all attempts to speak. Show that you understand the word or phrase by fulfilling the request, if appropriate.
- Pause after speaking. This gives your child a chance to continue the conversation.
- Continue to build vocabulary. Introduce a new word and offer its definition, or use it in a context that is easily understood. This may be done in an exaggerated, humorous manner. "I think I will drive the vehicle to the store. I am too tired to walk."
- Talk about spatial relationships (first, middle, and last; right and left) and opposites (up and down; on and off).
- Offer a description or clues, and have your child identify what you are describing: "We use it to sweep the floor" (a broom). "It is cold, sweet, and good for dessert. I like strawberry" (ice cream).
- Work on forming and explaining categories. Identify the thing that does not belong in a group of similar objects: "A shoe does not belong with an apple and an orange because you can't eat it; it is not round; it is not a fruit."
- Help your child follow two- and three-step directions: "Go to your room, and bring me your book."
- Encourage your child to give directions. Follow his or her directions as he or she explains how to build a tower of blocks.