

Frequently Asked Questions About Speech and Language Development

Many parents have questions about how well their child is learning to speak. Here are answers to the most common questions that parents ask.



Can a parent tell whether a child's speech is developing well?

You know your child best. You talk and listen to your child more than anyone else. If you are concerned about the way your child is learning to talk, call smallTALK at 519-272-8216 or 1-866-333-7716.

Do babies understand when we talk to them?

Babies do not understand the meaning of all the words we say at first. Babies learn about sounds and words when we talk to them. Talking to your baby while bathing and feeding him/her helps your baby learn about language and words from hearing you talk.

Is it common for younger children in families not to talk?

Sometimes younger children find that they can make themselves understood by making gestures and noises instead of words. Or, older children may speak for younger ones. Parents should encourage younger children to talk just as much as older ones.

Can a smart child have a speech problem?

Yes. Any child can have a speech or language problem. It does not mean that the child is less intelligent.

Will my child grow out of a speech or language problem?

Some children do grow out of speech or language problems. However, it is best not to wait and see. The sooner a problem is discovered, the sooner something can be done to help.

If we speak more than one language at home, will it cause our child to have a speech or language problem?

No. A child usually says his/her first words around the same age, no matter how many languages are spoken in the home. If you are concerned about the way your child is learning to talk in any language, call smallTALK.

Should I worry if my child stutters?

Children often repeat words or phrases when they learn to talk. This is normal for most children between two and five years old. Your child may do this for a few days or more. If you are worried about whether your child stutters, call smallTALK.

Should I wait until my child starts school?

No. If you think your child may have a problem, call right away. It is better to treat a speech or language problem early. Your child will have more time to develop the skills needed at school.

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Huron-Perth Preschool Speech/Language Initiative

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Speech and Language Milestones

Birth to 6 Months



From Birth to 3 months, your baby:

- reacts to sudden noises by crying or jerking his/her body
- enjoys soft noises and familiar voices
- makes different sounds (like - ah, uh)
- gets excited when you come close
- knows if there is a strange person or unfamiliar situation
- makes noises (eg. coos, gurgles)
- turns toward a new sound
- looks at objects and faces
- is calmed when you hold and comfort him/her
- smiles at you
- usually has different cries to let you know that he/she is hungry or tired

From 3 to 6 months, your baby:

- looks toward sounds and voices
- reacts when you show him/her a spoon or bottle
- smiles and laughs when he/she is happy, makes noises when he/she is not
- tries to talk to you, to himself/herself, and to objects
- may use a loud voice
- says sounds like “um-um”, “aga”
- watches your face when you talk
- makes noises to get attention
- makes sounds back when you talk

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How you can help your baby's speech and language grow:

- talk to your baby - talk about what you are doing when you are washing, dressing or feeding him/her
- use your baby's name when talking to him/her
- touch your baby
- repeat the sounds your baby makes
- face your baby when you talk to him/her
- do things that make your baby smile and laugh
- show your baby different sounds and talk about them (examples - play a music box, make animal sounds, crumple a paper bag)
- speak or make gentle sounds when your baby touches you, looks at you or makes sounds
- show your baby picture books and talk about what you see
- use lots of facial expressions when you are talking to your baby
- sing songs or nursery rhymes
- play simple games like “peek-a-boo”

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Speech and Language Milestones

6 to 12 Months



From 6 to 9 months, your baby:

- understands his/her name
- understands simple words like “up”, “no”
- makes different sounds like “ba-ba”, “na-na”
- may say sounds that sound like words (“mama”), without knowing the meaning yet
- uses a voice that rises and falls
- understands different faces (mad, happy)
- might cry when you leave the room
- starts to imitate familiar sounds and actions
- tries to play “pat-a-cake” and “bye-bye”
- starts to look at pictures in books
- likes to do things with objects such as shaking, banging

From 9 to 12 months, your baby:

- looks toward a sound or voice right away
- starts to know names of objects and body parts (examples - blanket, nose, toes)
- starts to point to an object when you ask where it is (like - where’s your nose?)
- points and makes a noise to ask for something
- may start to use a few simple words
- waves “bye”
- shakes his/her head to say “no”
- imitates simple sounds
- does things to see how other people will react (like putting a blanket over his face)
- likes people he/she knows - may move away from an unfamiliar person
- tugs at you or holds up his/her arms to be picked up

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How you can help your baby's speech and language grow:

- use gestures when you talk to your baby (wave “hi”, point “up”)
- show your child how to make gestures by moving his/her hand
- get excited when your child starts to point to things - say the name of the objects and let your child hold them if possible
- use simple words to talk about what you are doing
- speak in short sentences
- be consistent in the words you use to label objects
- play sound games - say words or sounds back and forth for as long as your child is interested
- play simple games like “peek-a-boo” and “pat-a-cake”
- tell your child to listen to the different sounds you hear (rain falling, phone ringing)
- sing songs or nursery rhymes

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Speech and Language Milestones

12 to 18 Months



From 12 to 18 months, your child:

- shows you objects when you name them
- shows you a few simple body parts - like nose, tummy, foot
- says from 5 to 10 “real” words, although they may not be clear
- says words like “more”, “mine”, “bye”
- says many sounds together in a “sentence” that you may not understand
- repeats words and actions of other people
- may not speak clearly
- shows you he/she doesn’t want something by saying “no”, shaking his/her head, moving away, or frowning
- makes sounds and points to objects that he/she wants
- plays alone or watches other people play

How you can help your child's speech and language grow:

- show new objects and toys to your child - talk about what you and your child are doing - use short sentences
- play with your child using the toys he/she likes
- read lots of books together, but don’t worry about reading all the words - talk about what your child is interested in
- pay attention to what your child is saying instead of how he/she is saying it - his/her speech won’t be clear yet
- don’t just get what your child wants; wait for your child to ask
- if your child doesn’t say a word properly, repeat it the right way without correcting him
- don’t use “baby talk” - use real words
- use words to label objects, actions and describe how things look, feel, taste and sound

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Speech and Language Milestones

18 to 24 Months



From 18 to 24 months, your child:

- understands simple directions like “drink your juice”
- can show you body parts on himself/herself
- says names of things, actions, people’s names
- starts to use two words together (“more milk”, “car go”) and by age 2 can say at least 50 words
- asks “what’s that?” (may sound like “whadat” or “whatssat”)
- speaks so that you can understand most words
- listens to stories with pictures
- carries on a “conversation” with himself/herself and dolls, animals or other toys (examples - sets the table, feeds a doll)

How you can help your child's speech and language grow:

- be a good speech model - use correct words and phrases without correcting your child directly
- talk about new words such as “on”, “under”, “broken”, “open”, “jumping”
- read lots of books together - let your child choose books that he/she likes
- play children’s music and stories and listen with your child
- sing songs and recite nursery rhymes together
- praise your child’s efforts to communicate
- talk about new places and experiences before you go, while you are there, and when you get home
- expand what your child says - if your child says “dog”, you say “big dog”

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Speech and Language Milestones

2 to 3 Years



From 2 to 3 years, your child:

- understands many words, including words for actions (“run, jump, sit down”), location of an object (“in”, “under”), pronouns (“I”, “you”), and simple opposites (“big”, “little”)
- understands most of what you say to him/her
- uses short sentences like “me do it”
- pronounces words clearly but not perfectly
- asks for things by name
- asks simple questions
- starts to tell simple stories
- talks about his/her feelings
- starts to play with other children
- will listen to a whole story for up to 15 minutes
- likes to pretend and make believe

How you can help your child's speech and language grow:

- listen when your child talks to you
- describe what you are doing, planning, and thinking
- have a conversation with your child, especially during quiet time together
- be a good speech model - use correct words and phrases without correcting your child directly
- add words and ideas to what your child says - if your child says “red truck”, you say “a big red truck”
- ask a few simple questions, but not too many
- play rhyming games with your child (“what word sounds like bat?”)
- read books every day

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Speech and Language Milestones

3 to 4 Years



From 3 to 4 years, your child:

- understands many words and most of what you say to him/her
- understands words that express ideas - like the time of day ("morning", "tonight"), the position of things ("in front", "down"), and questions that start with "how" and "what if"
- understands directions that have 2 or 3 actions ("look on the table and find a story book that you would like to read")
- speaks so that most people can understand almost all of what he/she says
- uses sentences that have 4 to 6 words
- asks different questions such as "how", "why" and "when"
- can have long conversations with you
- uses language to joke, tease and pretend
- plays with other children

How you can help your child's speech and language grow:

- let your child help you do things such as cooking and gardening - talk about what you are doing
- keep your child's conversations going by paying attention and showing that you are interested
- add new ideas to your conversations (example - talk about how things are the same and how they are different)
- use words that your child has trouble with in your own speech
- encourage your child to tell stories using books and pictures
- start reading longer stories to your child
- let your child play with other children
- remember that it is normal for your child to repeat words and sounds at this age

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Speech and Language Milestones

4 to 5 Years



From 4-5 years, your child:

- can follow complex directions (example - “please pick up your toys and wash your hands before dinner”)
- understands and answers many questions
- knows the difference between “heavy” and “light”, “loud” and “soft”
- can show you a few colours when you name them
- is very easy to understand when he/she speaks
- can tell you what words mean
- uses complete sentences that have 4 to 8 words
- can have long conversations with you
- listens to stories, conversations and movies
- remembers a long story that has been read and can tell you about it - or makes up his/her own stories
- likes to play with a group of friends

How you can help your child's speech and language grow:

- talk about your activities when you are together
- show your child different ways to use words (examples - use words that mean the same thing, words that are opposites, “pretend” words, rhyming words)
- don't expect perfect speech and try not to ask your child to show how well he/she can say things in front of others
- ask your child to help you plan activities such as making a special meal
- talk with your child as you would anybody else
- read longer stories with your child
- let your child make up stories for you
- let your child play with other children

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Ear Infections and Speech and Language Development



What is an Ear Infection (otitis media)?

Acute otitis media is an infection that happens when either bacteria or viruses invade the middle ear. It often follows a cold and is most common in children three months to three years of age. A young child with acute otitis media is likely to be fussy and irritable. They may have trouble sleeping, feeding and hearing. Older children often complain about ear pain, fullness or pressure in the ear and difficulty hearing. A child of any age may have a fever and cold symptoms.

What Causes Fluid in the Ear?

An ear infection can cause fluid to collect in the middle ear. Even once the infection has ended, fluid may be present for six weeks or longer.

Blockage of the tiny passageway that connects the middle ear to the back of the throat (eustachian tube) can also cause fluid to collect in the middle ear due to problems with allergies or adenoids.

Fluid in the ear may affect hearing. A child with fluid in his/her ears may:

- misunderstand directions
- not pay attention to you
- want the TV or radio louder than usual

Why Is It So Important To See a Doctor?

Any child with symptoms of otitis media or fluid in the ears should be checked by a doctor. In the case of an infection your doctor may prescribe an antibiotic. He/she may also recommend a medicine (eg. acetaminophen) to help with fever and pain. Sometimes, complications such as hearing loss can occur which may affect your child's ability to learn speech and language. Your doctor will help you decide what kind of treatment is best for your child.

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Can Ear Infections Be Prevented?

There are some things you can do that may help reduce your child's risk of ear infection.

Common colds can lead to ear infections. You can help reduce the risk of ear infections by reducing risk for the common cold.

- Limit exposure to large crowds.
- Teach children to cover their mouth and nose with a tissue when coughing or blowing their nose.
- Encourage your child to wash their hands frequently.
- Exposure to second-hand smoke may also increase your child's risk for ear infections, so keep your home smoke-free.
- In infants, breastfeeding helps prevent ear infections by passing along immunity from mom to baby.
- Ear infections can also result from influenza infection in young children. Flu vaccine has been shown to reduce their occurrence by 30-40 percent. Vaccination is recommended for everyone from six months of age.

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Fun and Easy Ways to Encourage Speech and Language Development...



Through play...

Play is any activity that your child enjoys. It doesn't have to be expensive. Play can be simple games such as peek-a-boo or pretending an empty box is a bed. Play helps language development because it usually involves listening and talking about what is happening, repetition, taking turns, using eye contact, body language and gestures - all of which are important for language development.

What to do when playing:

- Use toys, games or objects that your child enjoys.
- Give your child opportunities to play with other children.
- Use facial expressions and an interesting voice.
- Talk about what is happening during play.

Through reading...

Reading helps your child develop concentration and attention, while giving a good example of correct language. It's also an activity that allows you to spend time together. You can find free or inexpensive books at any of the following locations: public libraries, garage sales, dollar stores, bargain section of bookstores, toy lending programs. Or you can make your own!

What to do when reading:

- Choose a quiet time and place where you won't be interrupted.
- Let your child choose the book, giving him/her some control over what you read.
- Rather than read the words, you may want to talk about the pictures and the actions or make up stories.
- Read with lots of drama and rhythm in your voice to keep your child interested.
- Encourage your child to tell stories using books and pictures.

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Helping Your Child Deal With Frustration

Often when children have trouble communicating their thoughts and feelings, they become frustrated. Here are some practical tips that may be helpful.



- Talk to your child about anger and frustration. Try to help your child identify successful and not-so-successful ways of expressing frustration.
- Help your child recognize the situations which are likely to cause frustration.
- Teach your child control words such as “no”, “stop”, “wait”, “my turn”, “me too.” If your child can’t say these words, help him/her learn to express the messages in other ways (eg., gestures, signs, symbols, photographs).
- Provide opportunities for your child to play successfully with other children. Find play materials for your child that don't require a lot of language for successful use.
- Tell other children that your child is trying to be their friend. Stay nearby to help resolve problems.
- Praise your child when he/she deals with frustration successfully.
- Even though your child may be having trouble communicating thoughts and feelings, don't hesitate to set some rules about expressing frustration. Be sure your child knows these rules before you put them in place.
- Watch what your child is trying to tell you. Look at his/her actions and facial expressions eg. a child holding his/her stomach may be trying to tell you he/she feels sick.

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Stuttering

When most children learn to talk, they go through a normal “phase” in which they repeat words or phrases. This usually happens between the ages of two and five. This phase can last a few days or even weeks. Some children may not outgrow this phase and may in fact have a “true stuttering” problem.



How can a parent tell if their child is going through a normal “phase” or if it is “true stuttering?”

You can sometimes tell the difference between a normal “phase” and a “true stuttering” problem by looking at how often a child stutters and in what way. This may need to be done over a period of time. A Speech Language Pathologist can help to determine a stuttering problem. If you are worried that your child might be stuttering, call 519-272-8216 or 1-866-333-7716 and ask for smallTALK.

How can a parent with these concerns help their child?

- Be a good listener. Focus on **what** your child is saying, rather than **how** he/she is saying it.
- Try not to fill in words for your child. This may frustrate your child, especially if you have guessed the wrong word.
- Avoid telling your child to “slow down” or “take it easy”. This may make your child feel more anxious.
- Give your child plenty of time to talk without interruption.
- Encourage children to take turns talking, especially if brothers and sisters are competing for talk time.

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Facts About “True Stuttering”

- About 5% of children stutter.
- Three to 4 times as many boys as girls stutter.
- Stuttering tends to run in families.
- Stuttering seems to be caused by a physical problem, not an emotional one.
- Stuttering may be worse when a child is tired, sick, anxious or excited.

Early help can make a difference. A Speech Language Pathologist can assist a child and his/her parents, teachers and others involved to understand and deal effectively with a stuttering problem.

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What You Should Know About Learning Two Languages*

Learning to speak more than one language can be a very enriching experience for a child. Exposure to another culture creates opportunities for exchanges, travel, and the ability to communicate with people from other countries. Sometimes parents have questions or concerns about exposing their child to more than one language. Here are some facts that may be helpful.



How A Second Language Can Help With Learning

A child raised with more than one language will develop a larger vocabulary. He/she also develops a greater awareness of how words sound and rhyme which helps when learning to write and spell.

Evidence shows that children who have strong skills in their first language are very likely to become strongly skilled in English. They also do better in reading.

How To Learn Two Languages

There are many good ways for a child to learn two languages. A child can begin learning two languages right from birth or he/she can learn the heritage language (the language spoken by the parents) at home, and then English in another setting, daycare or kindergarten.

In a family where each parent speaks a different language a child can be raised bilingual from birth. In this case it is important that each parent speaks a lot of his/her language and doesn't mix languages when talking with their child.

A parent's reasons for choosing one way over another may be influenced by the language they and/or extended family speak or personal feelings about maintaining their heritage language at home.

Children learn language best:

- From people who are fluent in that language. Parents who speak the language they are most comfortable with, expose their child to a variety of words and well formed sentences.
- When they have a good relationship with their parents. This relationship is closer when the parent communicates in his/her most fluent language.
- When they are highly exposed to the language in all daily situations. For example, through play, books, music and the people in their lives - parents, relatives, caregivers.
- When parents don't confuse their children's language learning by mixing words from two different languages in one sentence.

Should A Child With A Language Delay Be Exposed To Only One Language?

There is no clear evidence to show that a child with a language delay should be exposed to only one language. This is true even for children with a severe language delay. A Speech Language Pathologist can check a child's speech and language skills and help parents decide what options are best for their child.

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