

“Normal” Development of Language Skills Varies With Child’s Age

by Susan Roberts and Susan Julian

NO question is more often asked of a speech therapist than, “Is my child’s speech delayed?” Parents usually ask because they recognize their child is not talking like children his or her own age, they can’t understand what their child is saying to them or an older sibling developed speech and language at a faster rate. May is Better Speech and Hearing Month, so here is a general guide to “normal” speech and language development.

The sound pattern of language that we call “speech” is made up of combinations of sounds that form words. The development of speech requires:

- The growth and motor control of the child’s lips, jaw, teeth, tongue, hard palate and soft palate.
- The child’s ability to hear and distinguish speech sounds.
- The child’s development of thinking skills.

Speech development, a gradual process, begins in infancy and continues through a child’s seventh or eighth year. Children develop speech abilities at different rates and ages.

In the development of language, your child must learn: words and their meanings, how to combine words to make understandable sentences and how to use words or sentences to communicate with other people. It is truly amazing that most children acquire most of their native language by age 5. The process starts long before children actually say their first words. The roots of language can be found in the early interactions of babies and their caretakers.

Keeping in mind that “normal” has a fairly wide range, here are a few general guidelines for speech and language development:

0-3 months: Cries to indicate needs, responds to parents’ voices, makes vowel sounds, makes noncry sounds (burping, coughing, sneezing), responds to loud noises.

3-6 months: Begins to turn when hearing own name, uses different cries to indicate different needs, starts to recognize people, makes more non-speech sounds (“raspberries”), begins to laugh.

6-12 months: Babbles different sounds, begins to use facial expressions, imitates sounds and sound sequences made by others, enjoys responding to words with gestures (patty cake, bye-bye), says first true word by first birthday.

12-18 months: Strings syllables together into well-inflected but non-meaningful sentences, names objects and people, uses action words (up, down), likes to be read to; has a vocabulary of 10-20 words by 18 months of age.

18-24 months: Produces first two-word combinations (Mommy go, me up), follows simple commands (bring Mommy the ball), has favorite words (“no,” “mine”), pulls person to show things he or she wants or is talking about, can point to simple objects and body parts.

2 years old: Uses two- to three-word sentences (want cookie, me have ball), uses plurals (cookies, balls), uses prepositions “in” and “on” (doggie on chair), uses possessives (my ball, Daddy’s car), uses -ing verbs (me playing), may mispronounce some consonants, but most of speech understandable, begins to relate experiences, starts to ask questions.

3 years old: Uses 3- to 4-word sentences (I want cookie), can consistently produce “m, n, ing, p, f, h, g, k, b, t, d and w” sounds, obeys simple commands, shows rapid vocabulary expansion, uses more grammatically complete sentences although still has errors, uses “and”, often practices frequently by talking to self, can tell a story to others.

4 years old: Uses four- to five-word sentences (I want my cookie), uses “y, s, l and r” sounds correctly, asks “who” and “why”, has many questions, begins to use complex sentences with few grammatical errors, shows improvement in articulation, uses past tense correctly (I dropped the ball), follows two-step commands.

5 years old: Uses 5- to 6-words sentences (I want my cookie after lunch), uses “sh, ch, z, j, v and th” sounds correctly, can produce all sounds with 80 percent accuracy, uses longer, more complex sentences, language fairly complete in structure and form.

Now that you have some basic ideas about speech and language development, if you are concerned about your child, make a comparison to the list above. The following are other things that might alert you to the need for further checking. Your child:

- Has had multiple ear infections.
- Is not easily understood by people outside the family or playmates.
- Seems frustrated when trying to communicate.
- Seems delayed in comparison to children the same age.

We hope this has helped determine whether your child is developing appropriate speech and language skills. If you do have concerns about your child, contact your child’s pediatrician, your neighborhood school’s speech therapist, Eugene Hearing and Speech Center or the University of Oregon’s Communication Disorders and Sciences Department for more information or screening.

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