

Parent's Guide to Better Baby Talk

Language Development In the First Three Years

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Typical Sounds Infants Make at Different Ages

0-3 months: Lots of vowels sounds. Some "k" and "g" sounds

3-6 months: New consonants especially "t" and "p"

6-9 months: New consonants like "b," "t," "d," "m," "n," or "w."

Babies learn how to speak by imitating what they hear and, in that role, you are the greatest "language role model" your children have. Throughout the average day there are nearly infinite opportunities to speak to and communicate with your child. For example, when you change your child's diaper, take the time to make eye contact and describe what you are doing as you do it. By doing this, you are helping your child identify the words for different objects and actions. In addition, you are showing your child you care to interact with him. When your child "goos" and "gaas," make sure to respond. Creating these kinds of conversations shows your child you are interested in what he is saying and engages him in a dialog that shows him the importance of his words and sounds which will further encourage him to speak. You don't need Baby Einstein or other popular instructional videos to teach your baby to speak. Daily, verbal interaction, playing games together, reading books, listening to music and singing together are all great ways to expose your child to language.

The Milestones of Language Development

There is a wide range of what is considered "normal," but there are certain milestones that parents can anticipate. During the first three months of life, babies are expected to start to smile when they see a parent, make "cooing" sounds, and have different types of cries to signify different needs (i.e. tired vs. hungry vs. pain). Between the ages of three and six months, an infant is expected to be able to identify the location of a sound by turning towards the direction from which the sound came, vocalize excitement or displeasure and to be able to babble using speech-like sounds. Between six and nine months, babies usually begin imitating speech patterns and their babbling begins to have both long and short groups of sounds. Between nine and twelve months, babies are usually able to shake their heads "no," wave "bye, bye" are able to point to objects of desire, imitate new sounds and be able to speak one or two words (like mama, dada or bye-bye). Between 12 and 24 months, children are expected to be able to use two word questions and statements (i.e. "Where Mommy?" "More juice"). By 24 months, most children have a vocabulary of at least 50 words and are able to piece together slightly longer sentences. Between the ages of two and three

years, children will generally have words for almost everything they see and experience regularly, engage in short dialog, are able to carry on purposeful conversation, are able to express emotion and are able to understand simple, two step commands.

Speech And Language Disorders

Speech and language disorders are the number one developmental impairment in children under the age of five. In situations where children do not develop speech skills properly or according to what is the norm, many parents start to suspect something is wrong but are told by well meaning friends not to worry. They are often lulled into a false sense of relief when they hear that Albert Einstein didn't start speaking until he was three years old or are told stories about "late talkers" who now speak just fine. The problem with waiting to get a professional assessment and/or treatment is that the child can miss important neurological and developmental windows of opportunity that are vital to their development and growth.

In the book "The Late Talker: What to Do If Your Child Isn't Talking Yet," the authors Marilyn Agin, Lisa Geng and Malcom Nicholl differentiate between a delay and a disorder. They define a delay as "a maturational lag in development" in which the child catches up to his peers naturally and without any intervention. A disorder, on the other hand, "is a significant (severe) delay with a disruption in the normal sequence of development that's a stark contrast to his or her typically developing peers." This child is not able to catch up without some sort of professional intervention.

If your child is not performing the developmental milestones mentioned above, there could be a problem. It is important for parents to understand that there can be a fairly wide range during which children develop and acquire language and speaking skills and still be "normal."

How do you know if your child is okay? Agin, Geng and Nicholl point out seven likely predictors of speech disorders, which are:

Toddlers who produce lim-

ited consonants and make frequent errors in vowel and consonant pronunciation.

Children who have poor verbal repertoires and frequently use simple words (i.e. want, go, got).

Two-year-olds who use only four or five consonants and a limited number of words.

Toddlers who don't imitate.

Toddlers whose play seems developmentally immature.

Children who don't use any gestures.

Preschool children who prefer to initiate conversations with adults instead of peers and those with behavior problems.

Above all, parents need to trust their instincts. If you think there is something wrong with your child's speech development, there is nothing lost by having a professional evaluation. On the other hand, if there is some sort of problem, your child may lose valuable time if you wait too long.

