

Your Child's Speech and Language Development

by Kathryn Elborn, MHSc and Elizabeth Kay-Raining Bird, PhD

Few milestones are more eagerly anticipated or proudly celebrated by parents than their child's first words. Language is a unique human possession, helping us connect with those we love. To be able to communicate with your child is to gain a precious window into his thoughts, ideas, reasoning, and sense of wonderment. From a baby's first cries to his seeming non-stop chatter as a young child, no skill will be more vital to his future success in life - academic, occupational and social - than the ability to communicate effectively.

From birth, babies are increasingly sensitized to the sounds of their native language. Even before they can talk, babies as young as 8 months are beginning to indicate some of their wants and needs to attentive parents (reaching for or pointing to a cookie, giving mummy the book). Infants are busy absorbing the names of familiar people, common objects, activities and places. By 14 months most children have said their first word (bye-bye, mama, baba, blankie). Between the ages of approximately 12 and 24 months, the toddler delights his parents by labeling and describing his environment (nana, juice, doggie, up, more, gone, push), revealing the growing vocabulary he has been working hard to acquire. This single-word vocabulary gives rise to word combinations by 18 to 24 months (more juice, doggie gone) and phrases (me all finish, dat my car) a little later. By age three, with seemingly little conscious effort or instruction, most children will be beginning to speak in multi-word phrases or even complete sentences. Save for some grammatical errors and simplified pronunciations that will resolve with maturation, the three to four year old sounds much like a miniature adult and makes a most engaging conversational partner. Nonetheless, there is still much to learn! The language skills of children continue to develop and refine throughout the school years.

This is how speech and language skills develop for ninety percent of young children. But for one in ten children in North America, the complex business of language learning does not progress so smoothly. How does a parent know if their preschool child has a speech or language problem? When is intervention necessary and when is it okay for parents to relax and trust their child's individual developmental timetable to take its course?

These are critical questions for parents of preschoolers, particularly since one of the most significant predictors of school achievement is oral language ability. Researchers in the fields of speech-language pathology and education concur that spoken language proficiency is an essential precursor to learning to read, write and spell. For example, an area of language that professionals refer to as phonemic awareness (the ability to pay attention to and analyze the sounds or phonemes of language as with rhyming and word play) is intimately connected with learning to read. A prominent researcher in the field, Marilyn Jager Adams, declares that phonemic awareness may be the "most important core and causal factor separating normal and disabled readers." Other areas of the curriculum, including math, assume the developing student can process language and integrate previously learned information with new.

Should I Wait until My Child Goes to School?

Unfortunately, many parents are given misguided assurances from well-meaning friends and family that their child will "outgrow" their difficulty or delay. As a parent, you need to trust your instincts. If you have any question at all regarding your child's speech or language development, it is almost always best to pursue a professional opinion.

As Patricia McAleer Hamaguchi, author of *Childhood Speech, Language & Listening Problems: What Every Parent Should Know*, comments, "when mulling over your concerns, bear in mind that a child who has a speech, language, or listening problem upon entering kindergarten will be at a distinct disadvantage for learning and participating in class." In kindergarten, your child will be expected to follow verbal directions, learn and remember new concepts, follow a story, answer questions, associate letters with sounds, and share information in an organized fashion and in speech that is understandable to others. Language is not something children

learn in a 20-minute block called Language Arts; language is the means through which much of their learning occurs throughout the day.

From a purely practical standpoint, parents may be faced with a waiting list when they do decide to seek help so adopting a “wait-and-see” approach is not advisable.

Early Speech and Language Milestones:

By age three to four, most children will:

- ❑ use sentences of 4 to 6 words
- ❑ understand and answer simple wh-questions (who, what, where, when)
- ❑ show an interest in how and why things happen and how people feel
- ❑ ask questions, usually who or what questions
- ❑ follow concrete, two to three-step directions (e.g., “get your socks, put them on and then come downstairs”)
- ❑ talk easily about daily activities, especially what they are doing, just did or will just do (e.g., what they did at the playground)
- ❑ talk to themselves and their toys while playing
- ❑ tell a simple story or sing a song
- ❑ give directions like “fix this for me”

Seek the opinion of a speech-language pathologist when:

You have any concerns about your child’s reading, writing, listening, memory, speech or social skills.

- ❑ your child has a limited vocabulary
- ❑ your child seems to talk less well than most children the same age
- ❑ your child often does not seem to understand
- ❑ your child stutters
- ❑ other people have a hard time understanding what your child says your child has a hoarse voice that has persisted for more than three weeks and is unrelated to a recent cold or infection

[adapted from ASHA’s website and “First Words” brochure (Preschool Speech & Language Program of Ottawa-Carleton)]

Don’t Be Concerned When . . .

- ❑ your child has difficulty with later-developing speech sounds such as r, s, l, th, and consonant blends such as sp (spoon). A good rule of thumb for this age (3 to 4 years) is that strangers should be able to understand at least 80% of what your child says.
- ❑ your child makes grammatical errors such as over-generalizing word endings to the irregular exceptions (e.g., goed for went, runned for ran, tooths for teeth, mouses for mice). Simply rephrase what your child has said, modeling the correct form, without drawing negative attention to his error (e.g., “Yes, Mom went to the store but she’ll be right back”).
- ❑ your child appears to be stuttering unless the repetitions of sounds and words are accompanied by facial grimacing, obvious physical tension, breaking eye contact or other type of avoidance behaviour. Preschoolers frequently go through a stage of “normal non-fluency. Because they are undergoing such a rapid expansion of vocabulary and sentence complexity, at times their mouths literally cannot keep up with their brains. Practice patience, slow down your own rate of speech and focus on the content of what they are saying versus how they are saying it.

What You Can Do To Help

- ❑ Play is important. Preschool children are active learners and learn many things during play. They act out scenarios, try on new roles, construct stories, negotiate game rules, and practice new ways of saying things.
- ❑ Books are important. Reading together can be snuggly and should be fun. Regular reading can help your children learn many important things (facts about the world, information about what people do and why they do it, new words and sentence forms, how to construct stories, rhymes and songs). As well, we now know that the road to reading begins with early knowledge about books and print. For example, children learn that print has meaning and that it is comprised of conventional symbols (e.g., letters, words) arranged in a particular way (e.g., English is read from left to right; top to bottom).
- ❑ Talking to your child often is important. Recent studies have shown that the more parents talk to their children, the more their children learn about language. Not all talk is equal! Children learn more easily when the talk is directed to them (rather than hearing two adults talk to each other). While some television programs (e.g., Sesame Street) are good tools for helping children learn specific skills, there is no substitute for face to face interactions! Remember that talking can happen almost anywhere, anytime (e.g., in the car, at the store, in the bath, while getting ready for bed).
- ❑ How you talk to your child is important. Children seem to learn best when they are interested, engaged and involved. So, talking about what your child is concentrating on and what they enjoy or find interesting at any particular point in time is helpful. Of course, we cannot do this all the time! Listening with genuine interest, commenting, encouraging, expanding, clarifying and explaining are all good tools when talking to your child.

For More Information

Contact the Canadian Association of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists (CASLPA) at 1-800-259-8519 or visit www.caslpa.ca

Each province/ territory also has its own Association and/or College of Speech-Language Pathologists and Audiologists, with information for parents and other consumers.

Recommended Reading

Beyond Baby Talk, Kenn Apel & Julie Masterson, Prima Publishing, 2001

Childhood Speech, Language & Listening Problems: What Every Parent Should Know, Patricia McAleer Hamaguchi, John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1995