
BACK TO BASICS

Language development delays

Language is a communication tool that helps children code and describe thoughts, store and recall information, share ideas, and solve problems.

Infants and toddlers use gestures, body language, and sounds to communicate ideas and feelings. Through their interactions with people and things, they learn to imitate sound—and develop speech and language skills. Most young children acquire these skills informally—through conversations with other people. Children gradually develop clear articulation and increase vocabulary, sentence length, and language complexity.

Some children do not learn language easily and need deliberate and responsive support to develop communication skills. Some cannot hear or receive language because of a hearing impairment. Others are able to hear, but cannot understand what is being said. Still others have difficulty using words.

Receptive language is the ability to hear and understand—to decode sounds into meaningful informa-

tion. Children need to be able to receive sounds and distinguish among them. Receptive language skills enable children to associate new information—words, images, and objects—with things they have already learned. *Expressive language*, on the other hand, refers to the utterances, words, and sentences that a child uses to ensure needs are being met. Expressive language skills develop after a child hears and understands sounds.

Support for infants and toddlers

- Talk to babies. Tell stories, sing songs, read books, and describe actions like hand washing, feeding, diapering, and strolling. Use as many nouns and verbs as the interaction allows.
- Call children by their names. Avoid generic labels like Honey, Baby, and Sweetheart.
- Hold babies so they can see your face. Play mouth games: Open your mouth wide, smile, stick out your tongue, blow out your cheeks—and encourage



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- the baby to imitate you.
- Play with sounds—clapping, knocking on wood, snapping your fingers, singing, shaking rattles, for example—and help the babies associate the sound with its source.
 - Encourage babies to vocalize and then imitate their sounds. Take turns with these vocalizations, just as you would in adult conversation. Your quick responses will encourage the baby to produce more sounds.
 - Provide materials that infants can explore with all of their senses—and talk about the experiences with the babies.

Support for preschoolers

- Use concrete words like *box*, *dog*, *milk*, *push*, and *green* that children can explore with their senses. Avoid abstract words like *nice*, *pretty* and *sweet* that are personal, subjective, and ambiguous.
- Use pictures, gestures, objects, and other visual cues to help children understand a concept. Rephrase and repeat your directions if you think this will help children understand, and watch children’s responses to verify.
- Be a good speech model. Avoid baby talk and never mimic or tease a child who has misspoken.
- Talk with—not at—children. Conversations give children the opportunity to practice both receptive and expressive language.

BE A GOOD SPEECH MODEL.

- Plan activities that help children sharpen their receptive language skills. For example, play “What’s that sound?” with real or recorded noises. Make pairs of sound cans with sand, gravel, rocks, for example, and help children match the sounds. Make up pantomime games (like sweeping the floor, brushing hair, eating soup, or wiping the table) with young toddlers and charades with book titles and center activities with older children. Share stories that children can retell in dramatic play or with a flannel board.

- Offer experiences that help children build vocabulary—an essential element of expressive language. Talk about what you are doing; explain how things work; name objects and actions. Encourage children to couple words and body language for self-expression.

Identify children with speech delays or impairments

Remember all children develop at unique rates. You will see a great variety of speech skills within any group of children—especially toddlers and young preschoolers. Review a chart of developmental milestones—a description of typical language abilities at different ages. Watch for the following signs of possible delays or impairments and seek the support of parents and language professionals. Early intervention is essential.

- Children who act as if they cannot hear or understand you. They may say “Huh?” frequently, or seem unable to follow directions as easily as others in the group.
- Children who repeat what others say as if the word is memorized and being echoed.
- Children who have small or limited vocabularies that don’t expand at expected rates.
- Children who, for their chronological age, put sentences together poorly. They may misuse pronouns (“Me go now.”) or prepositions (“I throw the ball on you.”). Or they may leave out words or otherwise upset syntax (“Time lunch?”).
- Children whose spoken language is hard to understand.
- Children who have trouble recalling the names of things they know well. ■