Teach Me To Talk!

Helping Parents and Professionals Teach Toddlers To Understand and Use Language

A Parent's Guide to Understanding Speech Language Development

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A Parent's Guide to Understanding

Speech-Language Development in Toddlers

Language development does not happen overnight.

I'm going to give you an overview of how basic communication skills evolve so that you'll have a better understanding of this process and will be able to gauge how your child is doing. However, this material should not be a substitute for advice from a certified speech-language pathologist who can work individually with you and your child.

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Resources from teachmetotalk.com

INTRODUCTION

The process of developing language
begins long before
you hear a child's first word!

Late Talking…

Should I worry?

"No two children develop alike."
"Don't compare your child to someone else's child."

For the most part, that's wise advice, but there is something important that you should know…

There *are* patterns of communication skills that babies and toddlers acquire within broader age ranges. If skills are not emerging and developing within that time frame, we know that a toddler may have a speech-language delay or disorder.

What's the risk?

When communication delays are left untreated in early childhood, research tells us that the risk increases exponentially for future academic and learning issues.

Learning to use and understand language is essential for nearly every other kind of learning your child needs - not only as a toddler, but as he gets older and enters preschool and kindergarten.

No one knows your own child like you do.

You are the EXPERT!

However, sometimes a parent can be so wrapped up in celebrating all of the things that are so wonderful about that child that they overlook areas where the child may be struggling.

That is why it is SO important, as we're talking about language development, for you to **objectively** look at your child and identify specific areas where he may need help.

As we proceed through each of these areas of communication skill development, we'll also review a list of red flags which should indicate to you - in no uncertain terms - if there is a problem with your child's language development.

Even if you do realize that there is an issue with the way your child is learning to communicate, the good news is…

Parents play a key role in providing early intervention. This doesn't necessarily mean you'll see a professional right away. What it WILL mean is that, as a parent, you can change what you're doing at home to help your child.

Early intervention works!

Communication

Four Important Areas

Early speech-language skills unfold in a predictable pattern and include how a child learns to:

INTERACT with others
UNDERSTAND what words mean
EXPRESS intentions with gestures or words
PRODUCE speech sounds others can understand

A problem in any one of these areas can result in speech-language delay or disorder.

Knowing what to pinpoint as the source of the problem determines how we work with a child and, ultimately, the progress he or she will make. To put it simply:

If you're working on the wrong problem,
you're likely to see little, slow, or no success.

CHAPTER ONE

How A Child Interacts

Social Interaction

Building the Foundation

All communication begins with interaction between two people.

Until a child learns to:

- pay attention to people
- listen to what others say
- initiate contact with other people
- enjoy playing together and sharing experiences

….he's not ready to understand and use words.

Social skills are the foundation for language.

Interacting is Connecting

What We Want to See

Seeking out and responding to other people is a skill we want to see develop in infancy. We want to see babies:

- enjoy watching other people – particularly their faces.
- smile, laugh, and get excited when you talk to him by the time he's 6 months old.

Even though they're busy by nature, toddlers with typically developing language skills are not difficult to engage. Toddlers should:

- include you in their activities.
- show you things.
- try to direct your attention to look at them.
- look back and forth between you and a toy as you play together.
- smile at you with frequent and easy eye contact.

If your child is doing these things, her social skills are developing nicely and not a factor in late talking.

Red Flags

with Interacting Skills

- Difficulty making and maintaining eye contact
- Doesn't use eye gaze to get your attention
- Seems to ignore other people
- Doesn't consistently respond to his name by 12 months
- Difficulty getting her attention when you talk to her
- Doesn't look to where you're pointing or when you say to her, "Look!"
- Demonstrates better attention to objects, a DVD or TV show, or an app or iPad than to people and conversations
- No back-and-forth sharing of sounds, smiles, or facial expressions
- Seems very independent and doesn't know how to ask for help when she needs something
- *May* not initiate or respond to cuddling

If a child exhibits several red flags with interaction skills, the issue is likely more serious than late talking.

What You Can Do

To Improve Interaction

Get down on her level on the floor and really play together. Find things she likes to do with you and do them over and over.

Encourage him to look at you and to share experiences with you. If he's playing with a toy or watching his favorite DVD, make sure you're included too!

As you play together, you should also focus on helping him learn to copy or repeat what you do. Teach him to imitate you with toys or during little games that you know he's learning from you. Try "Patty Cake" or "Ring Around the Rosies."

Limit "screen" time. Research says toddlers who watch more than 2 hours a day with screens are at risk for delays.

The *worst* thing you can do for a child who is struggling to learn language is to let her check out, do her own thing, or remain disconnected from others for much of the day.

Sing! Play! Tickle! Run! Jump! Be silly! Have fun together!

Did you notice my eyes in this picture? Make yourself interesting to look at so that a child will learn to include you as you play together.

A child must learn to love to stay with you and play with you before he can learn anything else from you!

CHAPTER TWO

How A Child Understands

Understanding Skills

Cognition and Receptive Language

During the first year a baby learns to understand how the world around him works. He learns about routines and when to expect things to happen in his day. She learns that objects don't disappear even though she can't see them (object permanence) and that she can make things happen (cause & effect). When a child becomes more skilled at moving his own body, he learns that he can get things and make things better for himself (simple problem solving). These kinds of milestones are cognitive or thinking and learning skills.

A child's cognitive skills blossom into an amazing ability to understand what people are saying to him. Between 12 to 18 months, a child makes associations with words and begins to follow directions. This is referred to as receptive language or auditory comprehension.

Receptive language and cognition are important because until a child learns to understand words, she is not ready to use those words to communicate.

A child must understand words
***BEFORE* he begins to say words.**

When Learning is Difficult

Diagnoses that Affect Cognition

If your child was born with a condition that affected his or her brain development in any way during pregnancy, we know this can impact cognition, or how a child learns. This may include children with:

- genetic differences like Down syndrome, Fragile X or other genetic medical diagnoses
- neurological problems that cause motor delays or muscle tone differences such as cerebral palsy, hypotonia or hypertonia
- other issues due to complications during pregnancy or prematurity

Sometimes this isn't explained clearly enough to parents. If you're in this situation, I want to be sure you understand that you should expect for your child to have some difficulties learning to understand words and then to talk.

There will also be children who have no known diagnosis at birth or as babies who also begin to show, even as early as twelve months old, that they are having difficulty learning to understand what words mean.

Red Flags
for Cognitive & Receptive Language Delays

- Not looking when you call their names by the first birthday
- Doesn't pick up on other people's facial expressions, tone of voice, and gestures by 12 months
- Doesn't follow simple directions by 18 months
- Doesn't look at and point to familiar people, objects, and body parts when asked "Where's ____?" by 18 months
- Doesn't point to familiar pictures in books by 24 months
- Repeats a question rather than answering it
- Answers a question incorrectly or off–target
- Uses the same words and phrases without adding many new ones
- Most speech is jargon or jabbering or using mostly unintelligible sentences after 2 (without the presence of a growing single word vocabulary)

A child's ability to understand and respond to language is a factor which helps us determine if a child has a more significant developmental issue or is just a late talker.

If a child exhibits red flags with cognition or receptive language, the issue is more serious than late talking.

What You Can Do

To Improve Understanding

Simplify what you say to your child. Speak in single words and short phrases.

Talk about what she is paying attention to in the moment.

Give him opportunities to demonstrate that he understands. Ask him to follow requests throughout the day such as, “Show me the ____, ” and “Where’s the _____?” If he’s not pointing yet, encourage him to look around to find what you’ve asked him to locate.

If a child does not seem to understand, show her what to do. If you’ve said, “Give me your doll,” and she doesn’t move toward the doll, point to direct her attention.

You may have to provide physical assistance to help a child learn to follow directions.

As you begin to work at home with your child, it is more important for your child to understand what a word means than it is for him to say the word.

Teaching a child to understand words doesn't have to be boring. Look at how my little friends are following new commands such as, "Put the puzzle pieces on your head!" Being silly can motivate a child (or two!) to stay with you and learn as you play together.

Adults may think a child is being "bad" or "disobedient" when he doesn't seem to listen or follow directions.
The real problem may be that he doesn't understand language.

CHAPTER THREE

How A Child Expresses What She Thinks and Needs

Expressive Skills

More Than Talking!

Before we hear words from a child, we always see other kinds of “communicative intent” emerge first. “Communicative intent” means that you can see that a child is trying to communicate with you or tell you something. Toddlers first begin to do this by crying intentionally or whining, then they advance to vocalizing purposefully, often by grunting or using single syllables that sound like commands, such as “Da!”

Toddlers who are moving along with expressive language will begin to use purposeful gestures, like reaching for you or trying to direct your actions. Those kinds of body movements turn into real gestures that we recognize as communicative, such as waving bye-bye, blowing a kiss or pointing to get you to look at something they see. All of these gestures begin around the age of twelve months, when a child learns to imitate your actions.

Gestures are an important predictor for language. Typically, gestures emerge just before true words!

Red Flags

for Expressive Delays

- No babbling by 12 months
- No back-and-forth gestures such as pointing, showing, reaching, or waving by 12 months
- No consistent imitation of actions, sounds, and words by 15 months
- No words by 16 months
- Less than 50 words at 24 months
- No two-word phrases without imitating or repeating by 24 months
- No back-and-forth conversational turn-taking by 30 months
- Any loss of speech, babbling, or interaction skills at any age

If your child is over two and is still not talking or only says a handful of words, there *is* an expressive language delay.

Please don't listen to misguided advice and do nothing. At the very least, you'll need to change what you do at home to help your child begin to talk.

If a child is developing slowly during a time when other peers are rapidly progressing, the child will be falling further and further behind…and no parent wants to see that!

The older a child is at the time when intervention begins, the less positive the outcome.

What You Can Do

To Help at Home

Teach a child to imitate actions during play. Little games like “Give Me 5” or songs with hand motions like “If You’re Happy and You Know It” are critical first steps to helping a child learn to talk. He needs to begin to “do his part” during the game.

Introducing simple sign language is a life saver for many families and toddlers! Try signs for things he loves or requests like “more” and “please.”

Many times single words are too difficult for late talkers. Try FUN play sounds like animal and car noises and encourage her to repeat those silly sounds after you as you play together.

Simplify what you say to your child so that your child can imitate words. Speak in mostly single, familiar words when you’re trying to encourage him to repeat you.

Focus on words your child needs to say to get what she wants like words for toys, food and events. Words for colors, shapes, numbers, and letters aren’t important for late talkers!

Children don’t need to just learn to talk, they need to know what those words mean and use those words to communicate with others.

Toddlers aren't nonverbal because they're stubborn or lazy. Late talking is a true developmental delay or disorder that may require speech therapy. Waiting to get help is the worst mistake many parents of late talkers feel they made.

It's not that a child **WON'T** talk, often it's that he **CAN'T** talk!

CHAPTER FOUR

How A Child Sounds

Intelligibility

Not Necessarily "Adult Sounding" Speech

Most toddlers substitute sounds and simplify words as they learn to talk. Many children will continue to substitute later-developing consonant sounds (r, l, th) until they're 6 or 7.

Even when a child's speech contains some sound errors, a parent should understand at least half of what a 2 year-old says and nearly all of what a 3 year-old says. We do not expect unfamiliar adults to understand 100% of what a child says until he's 5. Even then there may be some sound substitutions.

Children with muscle tone differences that have impacted their feeding skills will also have difficulty being understood when they are learning to talk.

CAUTION: When a child talks in what a parent might call "his own language" or uses long strings of unintelligible speech, this is jargon. Jargon is a part of normal expressive development, but when jargon persists past age 2 and the child is not using very many single words you do understand, this is usually a problem related to language development rather than how a child pronounces words.

What toddlers try to say is much more important than how they actually say it!

Red Flags

For Speech Development

Even though we do not expect that everyone would understand 100% of what a child says until he's older, there are characteristics, even before age three, that tell us that a child may have a significant speech sound delay or disorder.

- Limited consonant sounds in child's speech
- Vowel sounds are substituted or left off in words
- Beginning consonant sounds are omitted
- No two-syllable words are used
- Parents don't understand at least half of what a child says at age 2 and most of what a child says by age 3

If no one understands the child, even his or her parents, that's extremely frustrating for everyone – especially for the child!

Ignoring a significant speech intelligibility problem can set a child up for frustration and failure.

What You Can Do

To Help at Home

Avoid overcorrecting a new talker's word attempts. Focus on the intent of the child's message.

Don't repeat a child's errors back to them. If a child says, "uh" for cup, say, "Cup! Here's your cup!" Many toddlers need practice hearing words produced correctly before they recognize an error in their own speech.

Practice a new sound alone only a few times, then quickly move the new sound to a word.

Some toddlers will respond and correct their mistakes when you ask them to repeat words as you slowly model the correct way to pronounce words. Toddlers with developmental delays may not be able to do this until after age 3.

Negative attention and overemphasizing speech sounds may stall progress in toddlers who are new communicators.

Focus on talking and communicating rather than perfect speech with late talkers!

Don’t target speech intelligibility as the primary focus for therapy until a child’s language skills are close to an age-appropriate level. We always want to prioritize, recognize, and reinforce overall communication skills in late talking toddlers. Accuracy with speech sounds should be our least important goal for children under 3.

At this age, what a child says is much more important than how he says it.

CONCLUSION

Remember that you are your child's first and best teacher!

Parents make a **HUGE** difference in how every child learns to communicate. Even when there are significant concerns, taking action at home is a key factor in progress.

Milestones

Communication Skills

Here's a nice, short checklist adapted from Babytalk. Quick reminder…milestones aren't an "average" age. This list, like other milestone checklists, notes when MOST babies in the age range (around 90%) have mastered the skill. While a child who is not doing these things isn't officially behind, there is cause for concern. The skills listed here are the end of the age range for typical development noted with the word "By __ months." Be sure you're interpreting this important information correctly!

- **By 3 months**: Your baby should smile socially, smile to voices, watch faces intently, coo, and make other noises.
- **By 6 months**: Your baby should recognize you and seem happy to see you, seem interested in different sights and sounds, and begin to babble.
- **By 9 months**: He should engage in back-and-forth interactions with smiles, facial expressions, and sounds and respond to his name.
- **By 12 months**: Your baby should point to and reach for things, wave, and say one word purposefully in addition to “mama” and “dada.”
- **By 18 months**: She should say 10 to 26 single words, point to objects that interest her, and bring things to show you.
- **By 24 months**: Your toddler should say at least 50 words and use two-word phrases on his own like “Bye-bye mama” and “Car mine.”

Best Resources

teachmetotalk.com

GREAT PLACE TO START FOR ALL PARENTS:
Teach Me To Talk the DVD – Learn 6 simple techniques parents can use at home for success with late talkers. See play-based speech therapy with toddlers in real therapy sessions. Easy & effective!

Additional Recommendations Specific To Your Own Child's Needs
To Work on Interacting Skills:
Teach Me To Play WITH You – EXCELLENT step-by-step activities in a 190 page manual for teaching a toddler to consistently connect with you during fun social games, songs, and simple play using familiar toys.

To Work on Understanding Skills:
Teach Me To Listen and Obey 1 & 2 – 2 DVD set for helping children with receptive delays learn to understand what words mean and follow directions. Bonus section with disciplinary techniques recommended for toddlers who have difficulty understanding language and rules.

To Work on Expressive Skills:
Building Verbal Imitation in Toddlers – 180 page book outlines the recommended treatment approach for late talkers organized in 8 levels with specific instructions, word lists, and activities with toys and daily routines. Perfect choice for parents as well as therapists who work with toddlers and want written "how to" directions. Simple & successful!

To Work on How a Child Sounds:
Teach Me To Talk with Apraxia and Phonological Disorder – 2 DVD set for parents of toddlers diagnosed with speech sound delay/disorders.

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