

Questions & Answers about language development

Learning language begins with an infant's first babbling, gurgling, and cooing noises. Learning to talk is both a social and developmental process. By the time five year-olds start school, they have many of the basic speaking skills of an adult. To help their children learn language skills, parents should take time to listen, talk, read, sing, and play games with their children.

1. How do children learn language?

Below is a list of language stages for children. Please note that children develop at their own pace. If you are worried about your child's language development, talk with your pediatrician.

0-4 months: Babies gurgle, and coo (vowel sounds such as "oooh" and "aah").

4-6 months: Babies may start to babble (adding consonants: "gaga," "dada").

6-12 months: Babies babble and enjoy vocal play as they experiment with a range of sounds.

12-18 months: Toddlers begin to use sound in a meaningful way. They say one-syllable words,

make sounds like cars and planes, and say things like, "uh oh." Toddlers also understand the meaning of some words they cannot yet say. They may also use one word to represent a whole sentence. For example, "Milk" may mean, "Mommy, I want some milk;" "Daddy is drinking milk;" or "Look, there is a carton of milk."

18-24 months: Toddlers repeat words and are able to link words into short sentences. They know about 50 words, but can understand many more. They may use short sentences, such as, "Mommy go night-night," or, "Daddy throw ball." They may use familiar words the wrong way. For example, a child with

a family dog may see another type of furry animal and say, "Doggy."

2-2 ½ years: Children begin using more sentences and personal pronouns, such as, "I," "me," and "you." They may use about 200 words and know more.

2 ½-3 years: Children know about 500-1,000 words. They may start to ask, "who, what, and where?" Children also may ask "yes" and "no" questions.

3-4 years: Children can say simple sentences, but may not say words correctly. They may start to use more complex sentences and ask, "when, why and how?"

4-5 years: Children know and use more words. They speak more like adults, but still make errors.

2. How much do infants know about language?

Babies learn to speak by listening to the words that are used around them. They try to copy these sounds. It is important to talk with your baby so that she can hear the sounds that she will need to make. Children understand much of what is said long before they can speak.

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3. My 18-month-old daughter isn't talking yet. Should I be worried?

Children learn to talk at their own rates. Your daughter may be busy developing another skill. If she seems to understand what you say to her, then she should start speaking soon. If you are worried, schedule her for a hearing test. A child needs to hear in order to learn to speak. Poor hearing is a major cause of speech delay.

4. My child is 3½ and still mispronounces a lot of words. When will my child be able to say words correctly?

A child uses words better as he grows. Consonants are harder to say than vowels. You can help him by always speaking clearly. Do not correct his errors. He will learn best by listening and copying the way that you speak.

5. My 3-year-old son stammers. What should I do?

Your child is learning to match his thoughts with his speech. Don't overcorrect him. Give your child the chance to get the words out instead of saying them for him. Read to your child on a regular basis. Speak clearly when you are talking to him.

All young children stammer at times as they are learning language. This stage usually passes quickly. True stammering does not. If it continues, have your child tested by a qualified speech therapist. You

can ask your pediatrician for a referral. Your school district may have one available for preschool-age children.

6. What can parents do to help children learn language?

When babies babble, gurgle, and coo, make a game of saying the same sounds. Talk with babies as you feed, dress, and play with them. When babies are between the ages of 6-12 months, begin teaching them their own names and names of common objects. This is also a good time to start reading to children. Toddlers 12-18 months can begin to learn body parts, names of people, objects, and the sounds that different things (cars, airplanes, trains, animals) make. Eighteen to 24 month-old children can follow simple instructions. Read rhymes and simple stories to them. When they are between 2 and 3 years, teach children word games, simple songs and nursery rhymes. Include 3 - 4 year-old children in everyday conversation and continue to read books with poems, songs, and rhymes. Children 4 - 5 years old can play games that teach counting and colors. Continue reading, talking, and listening activities with preschool children. These language skills will help your child learn to read and write.

7. My husband and I are both Hispanic but have learned to speak English during our five years of living in the US. We want

our infant daughter to learn English, but we want her to know our native language as well. Will this cause her to be delayed in learning to speak English?

Children who know more than one language speak as well as other children. Children learn language quicker than adults. For a while, your daughter may mix the two languages and borrow words from each (sometimes within the same sentence) to express her ideas. As she grows, she will be able to separate the two languages.

8. My 3 ½-year-old son exhausts me with endless questions of "why" and "how come?" What should I do?

Be patient answering these questions and talking to your child. Much of an individual's learning takes place during early childhood. You are your child's first teacher during this time. If he asks questions you cannot answer ("Why does the moon change shape?" "Why don't animals talk?"), seek the answers together by reading books.

9. My 3 and 5-year-old son and daughter love watching Sesame Street and children's videos. Will this help their language development?

Educational programs and videos may help children to understand the language but they do not teach children to speak the language. Make sure

your children also have time for books, music, play, and conversation. Remember that most language development takes place naturally, when parents and caregivers make time to play and talk with children.

10. How can I get my three-year-old daughter to talk more?

Listen with sincere interest to what your child says. Respond to her in ways that will continue the conversation. Ask open-ended questions that need more than a “yes” or “no” answer. Give her time to think about and express her ideas and answers. Giving your child time to speak is one of the most important ways to help her learn to talk.

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