

Early Language Development: Information and tips



When do children learn to talk?

Children learn to talk through hearing and seeing others, and this starts very early, even before birth. As with all areas of children's development we have typical milestones for children when they are learning to talk. Usually children's understanding develops before their talking, so we expect young children to be able to understand more than they can say.

When should my child start talking?

Usually, children start to say their first words around their first birthday, although they will understand lots more before this. Children vary in when they learn to talk and there is a wide range of what's typical, but the following are general guidelines:

- **1 year old**
Children start to say their first words at about 1 year old
- **18 months old**
Children should be able to follow simple instructions by the time they are 18 months. E.g. 'kiss Mummy' or 'give it to Daddy'
- **2 years old**
Children typically start to put 2-3 words together in simple sentences around the age of 2 years. E.g. 'Daddy work' or 'more juice.' We would expect a child to be able to say about 50 words, but be able to understand many more.
- **3 Years old**
At about 3 years old, children are able to understand longer instructions such as 'put the teddy in the box' or 'get your coat, hat and shoes'. They should now be linking words into sentences around 4-5 words long.
- **3 ½ years old**
By 3 and half years, children should be able to be understood by unfamiliar people.
- **5 years old**
Children should be using well-formed sentences by the time they are 5 years old.

I CAN Help enquiry service www.ican.org.uk/help

Call 020 7843 2544 to arrange a free phone call from one of our speech and language therapists or email enquiries@ican.org.uk

Talking Point www.talkingpoint.org.uk

Visit this website for information about children's communication.

There is a lot more information about typical speech and language development on the Talking Point website (www.talkingpoint.org.uk).

I'd like to help my daughter, are there any things I can do?

There are lots of things that we know are good for helping children's language and communication skills to develop. These are helpful for all children, not only those that are late to get going with their talking. Try the following ideas:

- Get your daughter's full attention first. Get down to her level and engage her attention before speaking or asking a question – say her name to encourage her to stop and listen.
- Follow her lead when communicating with her. This might take some pressure off her to speak.
- Help develop her listening skills, as these are really important for children when they are learning to talk. So, play lots of games that mean that she has to listen like “ready steady go” games (for example blowing bubbles, listening for the word ‘go’ before pushing the noisy toy or knocking over the tower of bricks) and go on listening walks around the house or your local area.
- Give her time to respond. Children often need time to put their thoughts together before answering, so give her longer to respond than you would with an adult.

Are there things I can do to help her learn new words and phrases?

- Use simple, repetitive language. Keep sentences short as you describe what is happening. E.g. “We're driving in the car” or “Wow, you're building a tower”)
- Make the most of everyday routines for language development. Talk about what you are doing during activities like breakfast time, bath time and make these fun, language filled times. You don't have to have specific 'talk practice' times.
- Help her to learn words by giving her choices. Offer her 2 things to choose from whilst giving her the word, for example “do you want milk, or juice?” as you hold them up in front of her. Questions like these are better than ones that only require a yes/no response, like “do you want juice?”
- Give her good, simple language models and if she says a word extend the things that she says by adding an extra word, so if she says ‘car’ you add ‘yes, big car’. This helps her understand the move from one word to two words together.
- Try not to correct her pronunciation, instead give her a good model by repeating the word back to her the right way. If she doesn't respond, give her the word that you would have expected, for example "ta" or "bye bye".

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I'm not sure how many words my son uses. What's the best way to work it out?

Try keeping a word diary so that you can monitor how he's doing. Make sure you note down all the words he uses, not only the ones he pronounces correctly, as children learning to talk won't necessarily pronounce their words as we do. Count anything that is a regular label for something, or a word he always uses.

I've looked at the language information on milestones and I don't think my son is talking as much as he should be. What should I do?

Try contacting your local speech and language therapist; an assessment with them will be able to tell you how your son is doing. Most speech and language therapy services take referrals straight from parents. Read our [factsheet](#) on speech and language therapy assessment for more information.

You might also find it helpful to talk to one of I CAN's friendly speech and language therapists. Our [Enquiry Service](#) enables you to book a call-back from one of our speech and language therapists at a time that suits you. They will be able to talk to you about speech and language development and give you some ideas. Call 0207 843 2544 if you would like to book a call-back.

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