

Steps to talking – a parent’s guide

Age	Social and play	Understanding	Talking
Birth to 1 year	Waves goodbye. Shows affection to parents.	By nine months understands “no”, “bye”. By one year recognises names of some objects and responds to simple requests, eg “clap your hands” with a gesture.	Cooing after six weeks, babbling from six months as child experiments with sounds. Begins to use specific sounds eg “woof” for all animals. May say “mama”. Laughs a lot.
1 to 2 years	Uses objects and toys. Will draw an adult’s attention to something by pointing. Clearly wants to communicate.	Understands before being able to express understanding. Will hand over familiar objects on request. Begins to understand verbs and simple attributes.	Talks “nonsense” to self which sounds like speech. Gradually develops recognisable words. Tries to copy new words. Often a substantial vocabulary by two years. May start to combine words.
2 to 3 years	Recognises pictures and can match them to toys. Anticipates and joins in action songs. Can concentrate for five minutes. Tries to get adults’ attention.	Able to find two or three objects on request. Acts on simple commands, eg “kick the ball to mum”. Listens to stories with pictures. Follows simple stories.	A good range of sounds. May have difficulties with f, sh, s etc. Uses two and three words together. Language used for a variety of purposes eg “want drink”, “what’s this?”
3 to 4 years	Understands activity in pictures. Can pretend an object is something else eg a saucepan is a hat; a brick is a car.	Able to understand concepts such as colour and size. Will understand most of what a parent is saying.	Most speech sounds correct. May have difficulties with ch or j. Clarity may decline when excited. Fluency increases. Able to refer to past and future events. Talks about past events but tenses may be confused, eg “I goed to the park.”
4 to 5 years	Plays ‘pretend’ games with other children. Beginning to understand numbers. Can focus on an activity for 10 minutes. Can play in groups.	Understands abstract words, eg “always” and terms such as “on top” and “near”. Understands and can reconstruct a story sequence from a book.	Fluent, except for occasional errors. Some errors may persist but rarely affect meaning. Uses four to six word sentences. Commonly asks “why?”. Constructs own stories.



Help your child to talk

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The tips in this leaflet are some of the ways in which you can help your child to learn to talk.

Do be patient – the process is gradual and may seem slow.

Words may be unclear and your child may stumble or hesitate.

This is quite normal.

Learning to talk is exciting for children and parents. The process starts right after birth. It should be fun for your child, family and friends. But it is not necessarily easy. The process of talking involves listening, understanding, thinking, wanting and needing to speak, and being able to coordinate all the right muscles.

Babies start communicating as soon as they are born. To begin with, this is about their physical needs but it is not long before they are using eye contact and facial expressions to communicate. Gradually they learn to control these skills and recognise when other people are communicating with them.

These early skills support how children communicate and develop language later on. The more you interact with your child, the quicker they are likely to pick up language and speech skills. All children are different and develop at different rates. The vast majority of children will learn to speak but it is possible to make it easier for them.

Two books may be of further interest to parents: *Listen To Your Child* by David Crystal (Penguin Books) and *Babytalk: Strengthen Your Child's Ability To Listen, Understand and Communicate* by Sally Ward (Ballantine Books).

top talking tips

- 1 Listen to your baby and notice how he or she is trying to communicate with you.
- 2 Talk about what he or she is trying to do.
- 3 Have fun with songs and nursery rhymes and read to him or her. The more your child hears you doing this the more he or she is likely to join in.
- 4 Children learn to speak by listening to and imitating others around them. Don't fall into the trap of always quizzing your child. They don't learn by being questioned.
- 5 Children tend to pick up words and speech in the same way but some are slower than others.
- 6 Consider how your child mixes with others, how they play, their understanding, how they speak, what they say and how well they are able to express what they want to say.
- 7 Early language skills are linked to early reading skills. If your child is having difficulty with one they will often have difficulty with the other.
- 8 Children who learn two languages together in their early years sometimes confuse the two and seem to have poorer language skills in one language. The important thing is to look at their skills across both languages. Most children will catch up and there is evidence they learn to read quicker later on.