



Expressive language development in children aged 0-5 years

Part two of two-part series

By Ruta Rosset, Speech and Language Pathologist

As children develop, they learn to speak and use language. Below you will find a summary of the expressive language skills children generally attain at key milestones in their development.

Birth

Newborn babies make sounds that let others know they are experiencing pleasure or pain.

0-3 months

Your baby smiles at you when you come into view. They repeat the same sound a lot and “coos and goos” when content. Cries differentiate, meaning that the baby uses a different cry for different situations. For example, one cry says “I’m hungry,” and another says “I have a pain.” At this time, you can begin interpreting and verbalizing these cries for the baby to hear. For example, “you want milk,” or “your tummy hurts.”

4-6 months

Gurgling sounds or vocal play occur while you are playing with your baby or when they are occupying themselves happily.

Babbling really gets going in this age range, and your baby will sometimes sound as though they are talking. Have fun repeating your baby’s sound and taking turns in conversation. The speech-like babbling includes many sounds including bilabial (two lip) sounds: “p,” “b,” “w” and “m.”

Using sounds and gestures, your baby can tell you that they want something or want to do something. They can make very urgent sounding noises to spur you into action.



7-12 months

The sound of your baby's babbling changes. This is because it now includes more consonants, as well as long and short vowels. They use speech or other sounds (other than crying) in order to get your attention and hold on to it.

At this time, your baby's first words (probably not spoken very clearly) have appeared: i.e., "mama," "byebye," "no." Interpret these words for your baby to hear the correct pronunciation (e.g., "baba" = "bottle").

1-2 years

Now your baby is accumulating more words as each month passes. They will even ask two-word questions like "where ball?", "what that?", "more cookie?", and combine two words in other ways to make a variety of statements. Words become clearer as more initial consonants are used.

Again, repeat their utterances and add a word or two to expand. For example, respond with "you want more milk" when hearing "more milk" or "no more doggie, doggie went outside" to "no doggie."

2-3 years

Your two or three-year-old's vocabulary is exploding. They seem to have a word for almost everything. Utterances are often one, two or three words long and family members can usually understand them. Keep adding more information to your toddler's utterances as this helps develop both their receptive and expressive language.

3-4 years

Sentences are becoming longer as your child can now combine four or more words. They talk about things that have happened away from home and are interested in talking about pre-school, friends, outings and interesting experiences. Speech is usually fluent and clear and other people can understand most of what your child says.

Give your child time to respond to your questions and comments. They may need more time to formulate their thoughts and find the words to express them.

4-5 years

Your child speaks clearly and fluently in an easy-to-listen-to voice. They can construct long and detailed sentences (e.g., "We went to the zoo but we had to come home early because mommy hurt her foot").

These are general norms for language development. Ages and stages may overlap and one child may be faster or slower than another child in their communication development.

If you feel the quality of your child's interactions or their ability to understand or adequately express themselves is a problem, speak to your doctor, your childcare provider, or contact the Toronto Preschool Speech and Language Association for a consultation.

