



Receptive language development in children aged 0-5 years

Part one of two-part series

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

Birth

Language learning starts at birth. Even new babies are aware of the sounds in their environment. They listen to the speech of those close to them, and startle or cry if there is an unexpected noise. Loud noises wake them, and they become “still” in response to new sounds.

0-3 months

Astoundingly, between 0-3 months, babies learn to turn to you when you speak, and smile when they hear your voice. In fact, they seem to recognize your familiar voice and will quieten at the sound if they are crying. Babies will also stop their activity and attend closely to the sound of an unfamiliar voice. They will often respond to comforting tones whether the voice is familiar or not.

4-6 months

Babies begin responding to the word “no.” They are also responsive to changes in your tone of voice and to sounds other than speech. They can be fascinated by toys that make sounds, take enjoyment from music and rhythm and look for the source of new sounds such as the vacuum or a dog barking.

7-12 months

This is an exciting and fun time as the baby now listens when spoken to, turns and looks at your face when called by name and discovers the fun of games like “peek-a-boo” and “patty-cake.” He/she will also now recognize the names of familiar objects (“Daddy,” “eyes,” “car”) and responds to requests (“give it to grandma”) and questions (“more juice?”).



4-5 years

Children in this age range enjoy stories and can answer simple questions about them. He/she hears and understands nearly everything that is said (within reason) at home, school or childcare.

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.

1-2 years

Now your child points to pictures in a book when you name them, and can point to a few body parts when asked (nose, eyes, tummy). He/she can also follow simple commands ("push the car," "don't touch; it's hot") and understands simple questions ("where's the bunny?", "what's in the box?"). Your toddler now likes listening to simple stories and enjoys when you sing songs or say rhymes. This is a stage in which he/she will want the same story, rhyme or game repeated many times.

2-3 years

By now your toddler will understand two-step commands ("Get your socks and put them in the basket") and concepts or meanings like hot/cold, stop/go, in/out, and nice/yucky. He/she notices sounds like the telephone or doorbell ringing and may point or become excited, get you to answer, or attempt to do it themselves.

3-4 years

Your three or four-year-old understands simple "who, what and where?" questions, and can hear you when you call from another room. This is an age where hearing difficulties may become evident. If your child is non-responsive, appears to frequently misunderstand or you have any doubts, talk to your doctor about a hearing test for your child.

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