

## **Children's speech and language development**

### **Milestones in speech and language development**

#### **Baby's first year**

Language develops in interaction with the environment. Even young babies start getting more interested about human voices than other surrounding sounds. Young babies recognise their mother's voice soon after birth. Babies clearly direct their gaze to human faces and recognise when attention is focused on them. During their first two months, babies produce reflexive sounds like crying, smacking and burping. Around the age of 2–4 months, most babies have discovered eye and smile contact with another person and start observing the other person's expressions. The baby starts producing pleasure sounds like cooing and laughter. Around the age of 4–7 months, babies' ability to control sound production and articulation movements develops and they start playing with their voices by growling, whispering and squealing.

From the age of approximately six months onwards, babies start focusing more on the world around them. Babies learn to divide attention between an adult and an object, and gradually start using gestures, gaze and sounds to gain and give attention. Babies start babbling around the age of 7–10 months. When babbling, babies are playing with their speech organs and producing speech sounds that are similar to human speech. At first, babbling is simple series consisting of a repeated consonant and vocal, such as "da da da da" and "pa pa pa", after which the babble becomes more variegated, such as "kugi kugi". Babies say their first words around the age of 9–12 months, with some variation. The first words may also come closer to the age of 18 months. Babies start understanding several words and short phrases around the age of one year. In fact, their comprehension is better than their own expression, which still mostly consists of body language. Babies still babble a lot even if they may already use a few first words.

#### **1½-year-old toddler**

Toddlers can understand and follow simple instructions. They already use individual words. Toddlers' verbal expression is still slurred and does not include all speech sounds. Their vocabulary grows constantly. At this age, there are great variations in speech production between toddlers. Some toddlers produce many words, whereas others are still practising their first words. The important thing is that the toddler initiates eye contact, uses gestures (waves, points at objects, raises arms when wanting to be held) and follows pointing gestures of others.

### **2-year-old child**

Children of this age can understand simple instructions. They can say their names and use sentences of up to 2 to 3 words with word inflexion. Children know over 250 meaning-carrying words (range of variation 0–600). Around the age of 2½, at the most animated phase children may learn 50 words per day.

### **3-year-old child**

Children can understand simple stories, suggestions and instructions. They use interrogative clauses, commands and negative sentences and fairly long sentences with 4–5 words. Children's speech is almost completely clear and intelligible. Speech may lack individual sounds or they may be replaced by another sound. Children's speech may also contain short less fluent periods during which their speech may feature repeated syllables or words. Children enjoy looking at and reading books together and participate by pointing at pictures and talking about the events in the book.

### **4–5-year-old child**

At this age, children's speech starts resembling grown-up speech more and more. They know the basic rules of word inflexion and sentence formation. Their narration improves in regard to describing place, location, objects and things. Children start using their imagination more creatively than before. Their stories start getting long and linguistically more diverse as they practise mental and verbal skills.

### **6-year-old child**

At this age, children know approximately 14,000 words, and pronunciation is in accordance with standard language, clear and error-free. They name objects and symbols fluently. Children's phonetic awareness develops; they gradually realise that words consist of separate sounds, detect phonetic differences between words and learn to combine, remove, add and count speech sounds.

Children acquire basic interactive skills; they concentrate on listening to speech, asking questions about what is said, answering questions, speaking in turns and acting according to instructions. They enjoy riddles, realisation and pondering things.

## **Tips for supporting the speech and language development of a young child**

Children's language develops in interaction with their caregivers. In interaction situations, it is important that the adult is present and focused on the baby. Natural everyday interaction situations include nappy changes, mealtimes, dressing, going to bed and play. A baby's first method of communication is crying, to which the parent responds by picking up the baby and calming him or her down by speaking, feeding or changing the nappy. In addition to crying, a young baby also communicates with body language, facial expressions and gestures. In care situations, adults often instinctively use so-called caretaker speech, where the tone of voice is soft and the pitch is higher than normal. At an early stage, the baby's hearing range becomes sensitised to these audio frequencies.

Turn-taking can be practised even with young babies (the baby makes sounds – the parent responds – the baby makes sounds, and so on). Take breaks and give the baby time to participate in interaction. Turn-taking and using initiative can also be practised during play (such as songs and nursery rhymes); the parent starts the rhyme and stops without finishing, but continues as soon as the baby prompts the parent with gestures or sounds.

Playing with speech sounds, such as mimicking the baby's babbling, inspires the baby to continue and try out new sounds and sound volumes. You can give babbling verbal meanings and name things that the baby is interested in (when the baby looks at a doll, for example, you can say "yes, that is a doll").

Babies' language development is linked comprehensively with other development. As babies move and crawl, they receive more diverse experiences of the environment through all senses. Speak aloud within the baby's line of sight and about the things and objects that the baby is interested in. When dressing the baby, for example, explain what takes place ("We will put on the green socks", etc.). This is how the baby learns the names of objects and things. With young babies, speech must be connected to the "here and now" because the baby still has a short memory.

Babies learn language through mimicking and example. Speak and chat to the baby. Use short and simple sentences, repeat words, explain events and name things, objects and emotions. Use varied words in your speech so that the baby hears several names for the same thing (when

describing a toy, for example, vary the descriptive word: big–large–huge). When playing with an older toddler, you can unobtrusively practise different things, such as location concepts and classification (ask the toddler to hide the smaller ball behind the chair or group Lego bricks by colour).

Direct the baby's interest in surrounding sounds and ask him or her where the sound came from. Listen to music with the baby (you can clap your hands with the baby in time with the music, for example). Keep the soundscape of the home simple (do not keep the TV on needlessly, for example) so that the baby can more easily concentrate on spoken language.

Songs and nursery rhymes develop the baby's sense of rhythm and ability to distinguish between sounds. The development of a sense of rhythm is also important for language development. It helps the baby perceive the syllable structure of words, for example.

Reading illustrated books together with children develops their vocabulary and imagination. You can look at simple picture books with a 1–2-year-old toddler and name different things in the book according to what interests the toddler. If the child is older, it is good to speak with him/her about what happens in the pictures and read short illustrated stories. You can read longer stories to older children. After reading, it is a good idea to discuss the story with the child and ask the child to describe the events of the story in his or her own words.

Listen to the child's stories patiently and ask simple questions. This helps develop the child's narrative skills, and the child learns to tell the things that are essential for the story.

It is a good idea to encourage the child to play with his or her lips and tongue (oral-motor workouts), because the small muscles participating in the movements are important for speech motor skills. Let the child blow soap bubbles or blow through a straw into a glass of water. If the child is older, you can blow a feather around or try to keep a balloon in the air by blowing at it. You can also practise tongue movements by playing a game where the mouth is a house and the tongue is a paint brush that paints the house's walls (cheeks) and ceiling (roof of the mouth).

Children also need experiences of interaction with peers in order to learn how to function in a group and use language in different situations. Play situations with friends develop children's social skills. "There are so many reasons why it is a good idea for parents to stop for half an hour and play with their child – and then read a book together. This provides wonderful material for supporting language." **(Marja-Leena Laakso, 2008)**

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