



by Karen Stephens

# Detect Speech and Language Problems, the Earlier the Better

When blessed with good health, responsive parents and an engaging environment, most children's speech and language progresses just fine. However, some children struggle with understanding language and learning to speak it fluently. Research confirms that the earlier problems are detected and treated, the better children progress. Early detection by age 5 is critical if children are to keep pace with peers in learning and social relationships.

However, detecting a speech or language problem can be tricky if you don't know traits of typical development. The simple rule of thumb says a language problem may exist if a child doesn't understand and speak language as well as most children of the same age. Below I've listed developmental benchmarks that illustrate the usual progression of speech and language skills. But remember, each child develops uniquely, so age expectations aren't set in stone.

I also list cues that indicate your child's development needs some assistance — the earlier the better. Your parental instincts, close relatives, early childhood professionals, and other experienced parents can also help you determine when extra help is needed.

Parents with children over age 3 can seek early intervention assistance through most public school districts. Public schools often hold screenings which can help detect language and speech problems.

Proper hearing is critical to language development. Hospitals conduct infant hearing screening at birth. But birth hearing screenings aren't enough. As your child grows, and especially if your child is prone to chronic ear infections, hearing tests should be routine.

And please, don't let money keep you from getting your child help. Check into local agencies that may offer sliding fee services. Review your insurance coverage to see if its benefits could defray costs. Take time to see if your state has a children's health insurance program that could help pay for language screening or speech therapy services.

## Speech and Language Developmental Benchmarks

**Birth to 6 months:** Uses different cries to communicate hunger or pain. Shows startle response to loud noises, such as hand claps or dog barks. Turns head toward a familiar voice from either side and responds with a gaze or smile. Calms to preferred music or familiar voice. By 3 months, begins to use new sounds such as cooing with vowels and a few consonants. Laughs, repeats, and imitates sounds.  
**Between 4 and 6 months,** responds to own name and simple instructions like, "Blow a kiss." Responds to vocal inflections that indicate moods, such as happy or sad. Babbles repeating syllables — "ba, ba, ba."

**Cues for Assistance:** No startle response. Fails to turn head to locate a sound.

**7 to 12 months:** Grasps some word meaning. Can understand language of daily routines such as feeding or diapering (but doesn't speak language a lot.) Shakes head for "yes" or "no." Has words for mom and dad. Enjoys making sounds and

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stringing them together, likes to imitate sounds like smacking lips. Jabbers to engage loved ones in conversation. Moves to music.

**Cues for Assistance:** Failure to imitate sounds.

**13 to 24 months:** Pronounces (though not always precisely) some words, such as favorite foods or toys. Uses one or two words to convey a whole sentence, i.e. “Me down.” Simplifies some vocabulary, such as “wa-wa” for water or “nana” for banana. Uses inflection to communicate meaning, whether using proper words or invented baby jargon. Gestures to get attention and communicate. Understands words for items and can point or look at them, such as “Where’s the cow in this picture?” Speech is more understandable, but usually no more than 50%. Responds to simple questions with a nod and a “yes” or “no.” Likes singing and gesturing to simple nursery rhymes. Can find basic body parts, i.e. “Show papa your nose.” By 18 months uses most vowel sounds and some consonants. Up to 100 different words by age 2. Complies with simple requests — “Give me your rattle.”

**Cues for Assistance:** Doesn’t use words by 18 months. No increase in vocabulary. Failure to respond to simple questions, even with a “yes” or “no.”

**24 to 36 months:** Vocabulary increases rapidly, both the amount spoken and the amount understood. Combines more words in sentences. By 36 months, uses three to four word sentences and has a 300 to 500-word vocabulary. Begins to understand plurals. Grammar progresses but isn’t always proper. May still simplify difficult words, such as “sketty” for spaghetti. Smooth fluency isn’t expected, some stammering occasionally occurs; 80% of speech is understandable to a non-family member. Likes to be read to and begins to read the story by looking at pictures. Often asks, “What’s that?” Uses language to get others’ attention.

**Cues for Assistance:** Doesn’t point to or name familiar objects. Doesn’t use two to three word sentences that make sense. Shows no interest in being read to or hearing a story. Doesn’t ask questions, converse, use language to express needs, or imitate language.

**36 months to 5 years:** Engages in conversation about current as well as past events. Describes what others are doing — “Kitty is eating her food.” Talks a lot, even to dolls and toys. Knows by heart some nursery rhymes and songs. Vocabulary is up to 1,000 words by age 4, 1,500 by age 5. Clearly asks and answers simple questions. Uses more complex sentences, responds to, and expands on others’ comments, “I have a dog, too. His name is AJ.” Uses adjectives, “My tractor is big and green like my grandpa’s.” 80-100% of speech is understandable to a non-family member. Trickier sounds, such as blended consonants, are mastered and pronounced more clearly, such as “sl” in sled or “st” in star. Asks “Wh” questions often: who, what, when, where, and why. Grammar improves, but may confuse tenses until age 4. By age 4, correctly uses prepositions, such as over, under, up, and on. Routinely uses possessives like, “mine, hers, theirs, daddies.”

**Cues for Assistance:** No one but family (if that) understands the child’s language. Doesn’t create sentence structure of at least five words. Can’t give name and age by age 4. Can’t understand or carry out simple directions; requires frequent repetitions. Doesn’t recognize four to eight colors, basic shapes, animals, or items. Can’t listen to an entire children’s book. Doesn’t understand language, failure to grasp any meaning. Doesn’t respond to what is spoken, but merely repeats exactly what is said to them: “Do you like to play with blocks?” child parrots back, “Do you like to play with blocks?” Frequent problems remembering or coming up with words they have already know. Needs gestures to follow directions.

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.

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