

# Language and Literacy Development

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Language and Literacy Development Language is a beautiful gift. With it we can share our wants, our needs, our thoughts, our feelings, and everything that makes us human. If you spend time with a child, you have the power to give and nurture this gift of communication. Many factors affect the rate at which a child develops language. Sometimes language development slows down while a child is learning other skills, such as standing or walking. In other words, the bulk of the child's concentration and energy may be going to gross motor development at this point with little reserve for the development of language. The amount and kind of language the child hears may also affect the rate of language development. For example, if the child is hearing two languages at home, his or her brain is trying to learn two sets of vocabulary, process two sets of speech sounds, and understand two sets of grammatical rules. That is a lot of work! It may take longer to begin talking, and still the child may at first feel comfortable speaking in only one of the languages. Some children who are immersed in a new language at school may be silent for a long period of time. The rate of language development may also be affected by how people respond to the child. For example, the child whose communication attempts are greeted with eye contact, acknowledgement ("Uh huh. Tell me more. What else happened?"), and expansion of his or her ideas is likely to develop language faster than the child whose communication attempts receive little or no response. As children develop language, they typically go through the same stages of development. These stages are presented below. The exact age at which a specific child goes through a certain stage varies because of the factors given above, but the order of the stages is pretty much the same from child to child. Talk and read to your child a lot. By reading books to your child as early as six weeks you can also put him/her on the road to reading.

**Birth to One Year** A baby's first attempts at communicating emotions and needs are through crying. Parents quickly learn how to differentiate hunger cries from those indicating tiredness or a wet diaper. By three months, the baby will turn his or her head towards voices and recognize parents' voices (e.g., by stopping crying when parents are speaking to him or her). Expressively, the baby indicates contentment and/or amusement by smiling. He or she repeats sounds (e.g., cooing). At 4 to 6 months, the baby notices new sounds such as the vacuum and telephone. He or she responds to "no" and to changes in tone of voice. He or she pays attention to music. Early sound discrimination skills are beginning to emerge. Sounds have a more speech-like babble to them (e.g., babamama). When playing alone or with parents, the child makes gurgling sounds. He or she tells you by sound or gesture when he or she wants something. At 7 months to one year, the infant is beginning to recognize his or her name (e.g., turning the head or looking up when you say his or her name). The child listens when spoken to. The baby is beginning to recognize common words (e.g., "cup," "juice," and "bottle"), and to respond to requests like "Come here." Vocabulary and concepts needed for reading begin here.

Expressively, the infant imitates speech sounds, and he or she may have 1 or 2 words (e.g., "bye-bye," "baba" for bottle, and "no") by one year. The baby more frequently uses speech or non-crying sounds to get and keep attention. Babbling has long and short groups of sounds such as "mama maaa." **What You Can Do to Help** Always check your child's ability to hear, and pay attention to ear problems and infections, especially when they keep occurring. Even at this early age, there is much that you can do to encourage language development. Reinforce your baby's communication attempts by looking at him or her, speaking, and imitating his or her vocalizations. Imitate his or her laughter and facial expressions. Teach your baby to imitate actions, such as peekaboo, clapping, blowing kisses, pat-a-cake, it'sybitsy spider, and waving "bye-bye." These games teach turn taking that is needed for conversation. Talk while you are doing things, such as dressing, bathing, and feeding. "Mommy is washing Sam's hair." "Sam is eating carrots." "Oh, these carrots are good!" Talk about where you are going, what you will do once you get there, and who and what you'll see. "Sam is going to grandma's house. Grandma has a dog. Sam will pet the dog." Talk about colors (e.g., "Sam's hat is red"). Practice counting. Count toes and fingers. Count steps as you go up and down them. Teach animal sounds (e.g., A cow says "moo"). **One to Two Years** Your child is now able to participate more actively in listening to simple stories (e.g., Brown Bear Brown Bear, by Bill Martin Jr.), songs (e.g., "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star" and "If You're Happy and You Know It"), and rhymes ("Humpty Dumpty"). He or she can follow simple commands (e.g., "Roll the ball" and "Blow a kiss"). Your child can point to a few body parts. He or she can point to pictures of things in a book when you name them. Your child's vocabulary is increasing, and he or she says more and more words every month. Some 1-to-2-word questions, such as "What's that?", are used. Your child is beginning to put 2 words together; for example, "more juice" and "get up." He or she uses many different consonant sounds at the beginning of words. **What You Can Do to Help** Continue to talk while doing things and going places. When taking a walk in the stroller, for example, point to familiar objects (e.g., cars, trees, and birds) and say their names. "I see a dog. The dog says 'woof.' This is a big dog. This dog is brown." Use simple but grammatical speech that is easy for your child to imitate. Take a sound walk around your house or in the baby's room. Introduce him/her to Timmy Clock, who says "t-t-t-t." Listen to the clock as it ticks. Find Mad Kitty Cat who bites her lip and says "f-f-f-f" or Vinnie Airplane who bites his lip, turns his voice motor on and says "v-v-v-v." These sounds will be old friends when your child is introduced to phonics in preschool and kindergarten. Make bath time "sound play time" as well. You are eye-level with your child. Play with Peter Tugboat, who says, "p-p-p-p." Let her feel the air of sounds as you make them. Blow bubbles and make the sound "b, b, b, b." Feel the motor in your throat on this sound. Engines on toys can make a wonderful "rrr-rrr-rrr" sound. Expand on single word utterances. For example, if your child says "car," you respond by saying, "You're right! That is a big red car." Continue to find time to read to your child every day. Try to find books with large pictures and 1-2 words or a simple phrase or sentence on each page. When reading to your child, take time to name and describe the pictures on each page. Have your child point to pictures that you name. Ask your child to name

pictures. He or she may not respond to your naming requests at first. Just name the pictures for him or her. One day, he or she will surprise you by coming out with the picture's name.

**Two to Three Years**Your child is beginning to understand differences in meaning. For example, he or she understands the difference between "up and down," "in and out," and "big and little."Your child notices noises, such as the doorbell ringing, the telephone, and sounds on the television. He or she follows requests or directions that have two parts to them (e.g., "Get the ball and throw it to me").Expressively, your child has a word for almost everything, and he or she is beginning to use 2-3 word phrases to talk about things ("My baby") and ask questions ("Where's mommy?"). He or she directs attention to or asks for objects by naming them. Familiar listeners understand your child's speech most of the time.**What You Can Do to Help**Continue to use clear, simple speech that is easy to imitate. Show your child that you are interested in what he or she says to you by repeating what he or she has said and expanding on it. For example, if your child says, "pretty flower," you can respond by saying, "Yes, that is a pretty flower. The flower is bright red. It smells good too. Does Sam want to smell the flower?"Let your child know that attempts at communicating are important to you by asking him or her to repeat things that you do not completely understand. For example, "I know you want a block. Tell me again which block you want."Expand on your child's vocabulary. Introduce new vocabulary through reading books that have a simple sentence on each page. Continue to name objects and describe the picture on each page of the book. State synonyms for familiar words (e.g., mommy, woman, lady, grown up, adult), and use this new vocabulary in sentences to help your child learn it in context.Put objects into a bucket, and have your child remove one object at a time, saying its name. You repeat what your child says, and expand upon it. "That is a comb. Sam combs his hair." Take the objects from the bucket and help your child group them into categories (e.g., clothes, food, drawing tools, etc.).Cut out pictures from old magazines, and make a scrapbook of familiar things. Help your child glue the pictures into the scrapbook. Practice naming the pictures, using gestures and speech to show how you use the items.Look at family photos and name the people. Use simple phrases/sentences to describe what is happening in the pictures (e.g., "Sam swims in the pool"). Write simple appropriate phrases under the pictures. For example, "I can swim," or "Happy birthday to Daddy." Your child will begin to understand that reading is oral language in print.Ask your child questions that require a choice, rather than simply a "yes" or "no" answer. For example, rather than asking, "Do you want milk? Do you want water?", ask, "Would you like a glass of milk or water?" Be sure to wait for the answer, and reinforce successful communication. "Thank you for telling mommy what you want. Mommy will get you a glass of milk."Continue to sing songs, play finger games ("Where is Thumbkin?"), and tell nursery rhymes ("Hickory Dickory Dock"). These songs and games introduce your child to the rhythm and sounds of language.Strengthen your child's language comprehension skills by playing the yes-no game. "Are you a boy?" "Is that a zebra?" "Is your name Joey?" **Three to Four Years**Your child now talks in sentences of 4 or more words. He or she talks about activities (e.g., what was done in preschool that day) easily and fluently, without repeating syllables or words. Now people outside of the family are able to understand him or her. Your child understands and answers simple who, what, and where questions. He or she hears you when you call from another room. He or she can hear the television or radio at the same loudness level as other family members.**What You Can Do to Help**Encouraging continued language development gets really fun at this age. Cut out pictures from old catalogs. Then make silly pictures by gluing parts of different pictures together in an improbable way. For example, glue a picture of a dog to the inside of a car as if the dog is driving. After a good laugh, help your child explain what is silly about the picture. You can do the same thing with family photos that you do not need anymore.Continue to sort pictures and items into categories, but increase the challenge by asking your child to point out the item that does not belong in a category. For example, a baby does not belong with a dog, cat and mouse. Tell your child that you agree with his or her answer because a baby is not an animal.Continue to expand vocabulary and the length of your child's utterances by reading, singing, talking about what you are doing and where you are going, and saying rhymes.Now you can read books that have a simple plot, and you can talk about the story line with your child. Help your child to retell the story or act it out with props and dress-up clothes. Tell him or her your favorite part of the story and ask for his or her favorite part.Continue to look at family pictures, and now have your child explain what is happening in each one.**Work on comprehension skills** by asking your child questions. Have him or her try to fool you with his or her own questions. Make this game playful by pretending that you have been fooled by some of his or her really hard questions.Expand on social communication and story-telling skills by "acting out" typical scenarios (e.g., cooking food, going to sleep, and going to the doctor) with a dollhouse and its props. Do the same type of role-playing activity when playing dress-up. As always, ask your child to repeat what he or she has said if you do not understand it completely. This shows that what he or she says is important to you. **Four to Five Years**Your child now pays attention to short stories and answers simple questions about them. He or she understands most of what is said at home and at school. Your child communicates easily with other children and adults. Sentences give details, and use adult-like grammar. When explaining something or telling a story, your child sticks to the topic and strings together ideas in an understandable sequence. Your child may still have some errors in pronunciation (e.g., /s/, /t/, /l/, /v/, /ch/, /sh/, /th/, /j/, /z/), but is still easy to understand.**What You Can Do to Help**Can you still encourage language development at this age? You bet you can!Always give full attention to your child when he or she is speaking, and acknowledge, praise, and encourage him or her after he or she has spoken. Before you speak to your child, be sure to get his or her undivided attention. Pause after speaking, allowing him or her to respond to what you have said.As always, continue to build on your child's vocabulary. Provide definitions for new words, and use them in context. "This vehicle is riding on the highway. It is a car. A bus is another kind of vehicle. So are a train and an airplane."Encourage your child to ask for an explanation if he or she does not understand what a word means. Talk about spatial relationships (e.g., between, under, first in line) and encourage your child to do the same. Point out things that are the same or different. Play games that incorporate these concepts which he/she will meet later in the classroom in reading readiness.Continue sorting items into categories. Now try to sort them by pointing out more subtle differences

between objects (e.g., rocks that are smooth versus those that are rough, heavy vs. light, big vs. small). Again, have your child identify the object that does not belong in a given category, but now ask him or her to explain why the item does not belong. Expand on social communication and narration skills (telling a story) by role-playing. Play house, doctor, and store using dialogue, props, and dress-up clothes. Do the same with a dollhouse and its props, acting out scenarios and making the dolls talk. Continue to read stories with easy-to-follow plots. Help your child predict what will happen next in the story. Act out the stories, and put on puppet shows of the stories. Have your child draw a picture of a scene from the story, or of a favorite part. You can do the same thing with videos and television shows, as these also have plots. Ask "wh" questions (who, what, when, where, or why) and monitor his/her response. Expand on your child's comprehension and expressive language skills by playing "I Spy." "I spy something round on the wall that you use to tell the time." After your child guesses what you have described, have him or her give you clues about something that he or she sees. Give your child 2-step directions (e.g., "Get your coat from the closet and put it on"). Encourage your child to give directions to explain how he or she has done something. For example, ask your child to explain how he or she made a structure out of Lego blocks. When playing doctor, ask your child to explain what he or she did to give the baby a check-up. Draw a picture, and write down your child's story as he tells it. He will soon grasp the power of storytelling and written language. Play age-appropriate board games with your child (e.g., "Candyland" or "Chutes and Ladders"). Have your child help you plan and discuss daily activities. For example, have him or her make a shopping list for the grocery store, or help you plan his or her birthday party. Ask his or her opinion. What do you think your cousin would like for his birthday? What kind of fruit do we need to buy at the store? What If I'm Concerned About My Child's Language Development

Parents listen as their child talks, and they observe how he or she interacts with peers and other adults. They also listen to their child's friends talk. They may even be able to remember how older siblings or other relatives talked at the same age. Before long, parents are consciously or subconsciously comparing their child's language skills with the skills of these other children, and the end result is an impression of whether or not language is developing at a normal rate. If they sense that their child's language development is slow, parents may check this out with other parents, relatives, or their pediatrician. People may tell them different things such as "Don't worry. He'll outgrow it," or "My daughter didn't begin talking until she was 2, and now I can't get her to keep quiet." If you are worried, seek the advice of a speech-language pathologist certified by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association. A speech and language evaluation can determine whether language skills are developing normally, and whether or not professional intervention is needed. Click here for a speech-language pathologist near you. Click here for factors that increase the risk that a late-talking child will have continuing language problems. How long should you wait before seeking professional help from a speech-language pathologist? You will not know for sure. However, one thing we do know is that early diagnosis and treatment for language problems increases the chances of improvement than simply "waiting it out" and treating any problem later. Treating language difficulties early on can prevent potential problems with behavior, learning, reading, and social interaction.

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