

look who's talking!

Learning to speak is a huge milestone in any child's life.

Fiona Surtees takes us along the route from babbling to conversation.

Some time after the joy of baby's first smile and often before the clapping and cheering of those initial wobbly steps is the excitement and affirmation of their first words. When the amusing facial expressions and babbling baby sounds eventually become recognisable words, the journey to verbal communication has begun.

Language experts agree parents should typically expect to hear baby's first words between 12 and 18 months of age. According to Dr Caroline Bowen, eminent speech-language pathologist, children generally begin slowly, before having a spurt just before their second birthday. As with all developmental milestones,

she adds, some children will be ahead of the average, but if by 18 months there are still no words, there may be cause for concern.

A sensible litmus test for late-talkers, in Dr Bowen's opinion, is for children to have a spoken vocabulary of around 50 words by the age of two.

For a child growing up bilingual, that target encompasses both languages, so the same word learnt in two different languages counts as two separate words.

Until a child has 50-60 words in their repertoire, parents shouldn't expect to hear many two-word combinations. "At this stage most children will just be saying familiar single words like 'cup', 'go', 'up', 'no'," says Dr Bowen. Nor should you worry if there is any mispronunciation at this stage. "They may still be saying 'dar' for 'car'."

The doctor goes on to cite a reputed US study, which determined that by 18 months parents should be able to understand 25 per cent of what their child is saying. By 24 months, 50-75 per cent should be understood,

rising to 75-100 per cent by 36 months, and 100 per cent by the age of four.

"However, intelligible is not the same as picture perfect speech," she points out. "For example, a four-year-old may still substitute an 'f' for 'th' such as 'bof' for 'both'."

Also by age four, children should be using four- to five-word sentences, and correct grammar most of the time. Bear in mind too, that they should be understood by most people, and not just family.

"Children need at least half an hour every day one-to-one with an adult – talking, playing, looking at books," advises Dr Bowen. And while this may not sound like much, it can be difficult to achieve for working parents, sole parents and those with big families.

Cause for concern

Speech and language delays and disorders can present in many ways. Some children may have unintelligible speech, others are unable to process language easily and may have difficulty following directions or





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Talk tactics

Speech Pathology Australia offers these valuable tips for helping your child learn to talk:

- ✓ Speak slowly, clearly and simply most of the time.
- ✓ Use facial expressions as well as a variety of words, but focus on commonly used words like "nappy", "cup" and "bath".
- ✓ Emphasise imitation - as your baby makes new sounds copy them.
- ✓ Pause and wait for a response when talking with your child, giving them a chance to talk back. Try not to rush them or talk over their words.
- ✓ Play games with finger puppets, balls, blocks and musical instruments.
- ✓ Provide opportunities to interact with other children.
- ✓ Hone their hearing skills. When the doorbell rings or a plane flies over, talk about it.
- ✓ Read colourful picture books. Point things out and say what they are.
- ✓ As speech develops, if a child says something unclearly, it is good practice to repeat the word back as it should sound.

expressing ideas.

"Poor language development can affect every aspect of a child's education," explains Professor Sheena Reilly, who is directing a ground-breaking longitudinal study of language development. "We know language and reading problems are quite closely related and there are also social and behavioural components."

The Early Language In Victoria Study (ELVS), conducted through Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital, is following over 1900 children, from eight months until they turn seven, to determine why language development is more difficult for some. "At least seven per cent of four- to five-year-olds are going to have language problems - some of which will remain undetected," says Professor Reilly. "By focusing on children's language milestones, family background and family interactions the study aims to pick up children with difficulties much earlier, so they can be helped sooner. There is so much variation in rates of development, and we want to find out if there is a set of things which may indicate early in infancy which children are at risk of developing language problems later."

Learning language

The consensus is that humans are instinctively programmed to learn language. "We are generally born equipped to acquire and develop communication skills," says Professor Reilly, who also heads the language research unit of the Murdoch Children's Research Institute in Melbourne.

Genetics also play a role, she says, in

When to seek help

If you have any concerns about your child's speech development consult a speech pathologist. Your GP, child health nurse or pre-school director should be able to direct you to local services. Seek advice if your child has a vocabulary of less than 50 words by age two.

"Also if young children are not being sociable and don't understand the concept of taking turns it should be checked," says Dr Bowen. "And stuttering should always be checked out. Don't wait and see what happens."

determining language disorders and "environmental factors are critical in developing the richness of language, such as vocabulary size".

The key to learning language, however, is listening. "All babies babble, including deaf babies. It is reflexive," says Dr Bowen. "Irrespective of language or culture all babies babble in exactly the same way. They later drop the sounds that are not typical in their own language."

In other words, babies start with the same sounds, and then lose the ones they don't hear, which means it is vital to converse with babies to encourage them to talk.

The common practice of using a different tone and style when interacting with little ones is both normal and beneficial, according to Dr Bowen. Known as Child Directed Speech (and formerly motherese) it has some specific characteristics including a slower speech rate, increased pitch variation and more repetition.

"Baby talk can be fun but not everyone is comfortable doing it," she says, adding that children learn from a very early age about the rhythms of language and how to have fun with words. This can be encouraged through hiding games like "peek-a-boo" and tickling games like round and round the garden, as well as songs and rhymes. 🐾

Websites:

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www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au
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www.nzsta-speech.org.nz
 +64 3 235 8257 (New Zealand)

The SA Government's parenting and child health website has a good section on learning to talk at:
www.cyh.com/HealthTopics

Books:

**Talk, Listen and Learn:
 Boost your child's language
 and learning abilities**

by L. Clark and C Ireland
 (Harper Collins, \$24.95)

Baby Talk

by Dr Sally Ward (Arrow, \$32.95)