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Do you have a little chatterbox or are you wondering whether you've got a strong, silent type?

# TALKING

## through the ages

All those beautiful babbling, cooing and squealing noises babies make aren't just designed to delight their mums and dads.

Babies make sounds from birth in preparation for the day they say their first words, usually from about a year old.

Learning to talk is one of the most complex skills a baby will master. While some babies take to it like a duck to quacking, others may take a little longer to get their brains and mouths working together to create words.

Melbourne speech pathologist Karen Nitsche says babies do grasp language at different rates but there are some broad guidelines about how quickly they gather words and sentences.

"We roughly say that first words come at around one year and then roughly two words together at around two years," says Karen, who has a private practice and works at a community health service.

If you sense your toddler may be having problems, the sooner you get professional help the better – although there's no need to worry unnecessarily before the age of two, Karen says.

"But if your child is two and really only has a handful of words, then that would be a time when we would like to assess what's going on for them."

### First things

From birth, babies are preparing for the day when they eventually say a word. They are watching you carefully, they are practising making noises and they are learning about how their mouth and lips work to form sounds.

It's no coincidence that the first sounds that develop are the 'lip' sounds, such as 'b', 'm' and 'w' which a baby can observe more easily and are produced with the most simple mouth movements.

Children also understand a lot more than they can speak, so a child aged under one might not be able to say 'Daddy' yet, but might glance at the front door if you say, "When's Daddy going to come home?"

By the age of one, a baby should be able to use a word which represents something, be that Mum or ball or juice, even if it's not very clear.

### Two by twos

Once they get the hang of making words, there's often an explosion of vocabulary from about 18 months on. By the time a child is two, she could be expected to have about 200 words in her repertoire. She is also learning to string these words together and can form very simple sentences, such as "Daddy gone" or "More juice".

The next sounds that tend to come are the sounds that are further back in the mouth, including 't', 'd' and 'n'. And by the time a child is three, she is starting to put three to four words together in a sentence and is using word endings, such as the plural for 'dogs'.

"They still make mistakes and they still mix words around but by three they should be understood by most people," says Karen.

### Talking heads

The most common problem among children of this age is simply being 'slow to speak' says Karen.

There can be many reasons for this and the first thing speech pathologists check is a child's hearing. Repeated ear infections can impact on hearing and this in turn affects how toddlers learn to talk.

"Once their hearing is managed, their language usually takes off," says Karen.

Or in some homes, children haven't been exposed to lots of talking which is essential for speech development.

"Talk to your babies all the time about what you are doing because we know that how children learn language is by hearing language," says Karen.

In rarer cases, children might have a broader problem like a cognitive delay

"WE ROUGHLY SAY THAT FIRST WORDS COME AT AROUND ONE YEAR AND THEN ROUGHLY TWO WORDS TOGETHER AT AROUND TWO YEARS"

or another disorder such as autism. It could also be a problem to do with the mouth such as tongue tie or a speech co-ordination issue, making it hard to put all the elements of talking together.

### Role models

Karen says she helps parents learn to repeat, model and expand. This means they repeat to their child the sounds and words the child is saying, interpreting them and saying them back accurately. Parents are also encouraged to model speech, which means they are shown how to talk all the time to their child in a simple way about things happening in the here and now, such as at bath time.

"It's talking in an adult-like way but in a simplified way," says Karen.

Expanding on what a child is talking about is also a good way to help their vocabulary and speech patterns. For example, if your child points out a car she sees going past, you might go on to talk about how the car is red and is going fast but is now stopping.

So, talk to your child, encourage them to talk to you, nudge their vocabulary along and before you know it, you'll have a little chatterbox. **M&B**

### TALK THE TALK

- ✓ Talk to your baby all the time, making lots of eye contact.
- ✓ Copy her and take turns to talk, helping her understand what a conversation is about.
- ✓ Read books together and ask her to identify what's in the pictures.
- ✓ Offer choices. Rather than asking yes/no questions, ask, "Would you like some apple or banana?"
- ✓ For more information see [www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au](http://www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au), where you'll find lots of fact sheets about speech and children.