

Try this first

Strategies to help your child's speech, language and communication development

Children's communication skills develop over a period of time and at different rates.

Most children will develop communication skills naturally, whilst some will need additional strategy support. Other children require input from the Speech & Language Therapy Service.

Knowing what to expect means you are more likely to identify children early on that may need extra support with their communication skills. If you can implement strategies straight away, this may prevent future difficulties.

This guide, provides ideas for you to 'try first' if your child's speech, language and communication is not developing as expected. Try these ideas before making a referral to Speech and Language Therapy.



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Observation
checkpoint:
6 months

Does your baby . . .

- Respond to familiar voices and their own name (turning towards a sound when they hear it)?
- Babble, coo or gurgle (experiment with sounds that are not yet recognisable words)?
- Smile/laugh when they notice you smile/laugh.
- Make noises when you talk to them or make noises to gain your attention?

If not, try this:



**Sing
songs
and
nursery
rhymes to
baby**

Talk to baby

Hearing a range of different words in different environments and situations, helps to build understanding and use of new vocabulary

Position yourself where baby can see you

Try playing 'peekaboo' to encourage anticipation which can trigger positive emotions like giggles and joy. Peekaboo helps to engage your baby in back-and-forth interactions

**Emphasise your
facial expressions**

Respond when baby makes sounds

Copying your baby's sounds can make for a fun and engaging interaction. It encourages baby to make and explore more sounds

**Allow baby
to see your
mouth as
you
talk/make
sounds**



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Observation
checkpoint:
12 months

Does your toddler . . .

- Show an interest in things by pointing at them or using gestures?
- Use some single words, for example 'teddy' 'mama', (although not always spoken very clearly)?
- Make a clear choice when offered two items, indicating in some way what they want? (e.g. by pointing, reaching out, vocalising, looking at the desired item).
- Recognise very familiar objects and find them e.g. "where's **shoes**?".

If not, try this:



**Point to
objects as
you name
them**

**Name
objects your
child looks
at, points to
or picks up**

**Keep interactions
exciting**

exaggerate your facial expressions and tone of voice, and give lots of positive feedback when your child does something independently

Model the use of gestures

e.g. shake your head for 'no', 'nod your head for 'yes'. Wave hello and goodbye. Put items out of reach to encourage your child to reach for or point to request them

**Offer your toddler
choices where there
is opportunity**

e.g. "banana or toast" (snack time) / "bubbles or blocks" (play time). Hold the choices up for your toddler to see and clearly name them. Look at the choices as you name each.

Offer your child something they like vs something they don't to encourage them to look between both options



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Observation
checkpoint:
18 months

Does your toddler . . .

- Listen and respond to simple, familiar instructions such as "put your shoes on"?
- Use 20 or more clear single words?
- Use adult-like speech / sound patterns (even in jargon)?
- Understand lots of single words and some two-word phrases such as "give me" or "coat on"?

If not, try this:



Label actions throughout the day

such as
"eating",
"walking" or
"sleeping".

Keep a conversational rhythm

Even if your child is using lots of jargon, respond as if you have understood what they have said, and keep the conversation going

Play with groups of objects

Such as small animals, soft toys or picnic sets. Ask your child to "give" or "find" different toys while you're playing and use comments such as "you have teddy, mummy has doggy" or "You've got a teacup. Look! Dolly has a teacup too!"

Focus their attention

by calling their name before giving an instruction

Simplify instructions

into manageable chunks (e.g., instead of "can you find your coat and put on" simplify this to "coat on") and **repeat** the instructions while they complete it to reassure them.

Model functional words

Such as "more" (more drink), "stop" and "finished"



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Observation
checkpoint:
24 months

Does your child . . .

- Use 50+ different words?
- Put two words together such as "more milk" or "want ball"?
- Ask simple questions e.g., "what's that"?
- Understand simple instructions and questions such as "throw the ball" or "where's your coat"?
- Enjoy patterns in rhymes and stories and try to join in with actions or vocalisations?

If not, try this:



Model linking words

repeat what your child says and add a word. E.g., If your child says 'car', say 'red car' or 'big car'.

Sing songs and read stories that have repetitive rhymes

Repeat words back to your child

If your child says a word that is unclear (such as "mi" instead of "milk"), repeat the word back to them so they have another opportunity to hear it e.g., "yes the **milk**".

Talk about what you're doing

For example, "I'm pouring the juice into the cup". This will help your child learn language in context.

Do activities in small groups

Such as simple board games with parents and siblings, or arts and crafts with 1-2 friends

Ask questions about what they're playing with such as "what's this" or "who's that"



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Observation
checkpoint:
3 years

Does your child . . .

- Use around 300 words, including pronouns (me / she / him) and early prepositions (in / on / under)?
- Link up to 5 words at a time
- Understand 3 key word instructions such as "wash dolly's hands" and simple questions about "who", "what" and "where"?
- Is your child easily understood by new / unfamiliar adults?

If not, try this:



Use a consistent structure for transitions

e.g., "This has finished, now we're..." or "Now we're ..., next we'll..."

Ask your child to find different items throughout the day

Create opportunities within your routine for your child to complete instructions such as "can you bring mummy's cup" or "can you find your big coat".

Listen patiently and try not to say words for them or tell them they've said a word wrong

Toddlers often need a bit of extra time to think of a word. Give them time, and if they use the wrong sound in a word, use the word in a sentence back to them so they can hear the right pronunciation.

Encourage turn taking within play, asking them "whose turn is next"

Ask your child questions when playing or reading books

Ask questions such as "who is jumping" or "where has teddy gone". Include extra information in your responses and assess what your child says (e.g., "yes, the boy is jumping! And the girl is kicking the ball...")

Introduce "in/on/under" into play

e.g., "can you put teddy under the bed" "can you put dolly in the cup?"



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Observation
checkpoint:
4 years

Does your child . . .

- Use longer sentences linking up to 6 words?
- Understand simple 'why' questions?
- Join sentences using 'because' and 'and'?
- Understand instructions with two or more parts eg. 'put your shoes on **and** wait by the door'.

If not, try this:



Use open ended phrases in play such as "I wonder what will happen if..." and leave gaps for your child to respond / fill in the answer. This will encourage your child to think and create longer responses

Model using words like **"and"** and **"because"** when talking about books, games or pictures

Use books with pictures and no words to start conversations

Plan play activities with your child based on your child's favorite things / interests

Pick a theme / topic and follow your child's lead! Encourage creativity and take opportunities to include new vocabulary

Let your child know what they've done
Even if you've had to break an instruction into different parts, once they have completed both parts, tell them! "Well done! You made a drink **and** sat at the table!"

Continue adding to your child's language
Making their sentences longer by adding information



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Further Information



[Ages and stages - Speech and Language UK: Changing young lives](https://help-for-early-years-providers.education.gov.uk/communication-and-language)

<https://help-for-early-years-providers.education.gov.uk/communication-and-language>

This website provides activity ideas and advice for teaching communication and language skills in the early years.

[CBeebies Parenting](https://www.cbeebiesparenting.co.uk/)

The BBC Cbeebies parenting site is brilliant for nursery staff and a good resource to direct parents to.

[Makaton.org](https://www.makaton.org/)

<https://singinghands.co.uk/>

Singing hands 'promotes language development through signing to raise confident and able communicators'.

<https://hungrylittleminds.campaign.gov.uk/>

This is another government website that provides strategies / advice to support children's communication skills at various ages and stages.



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