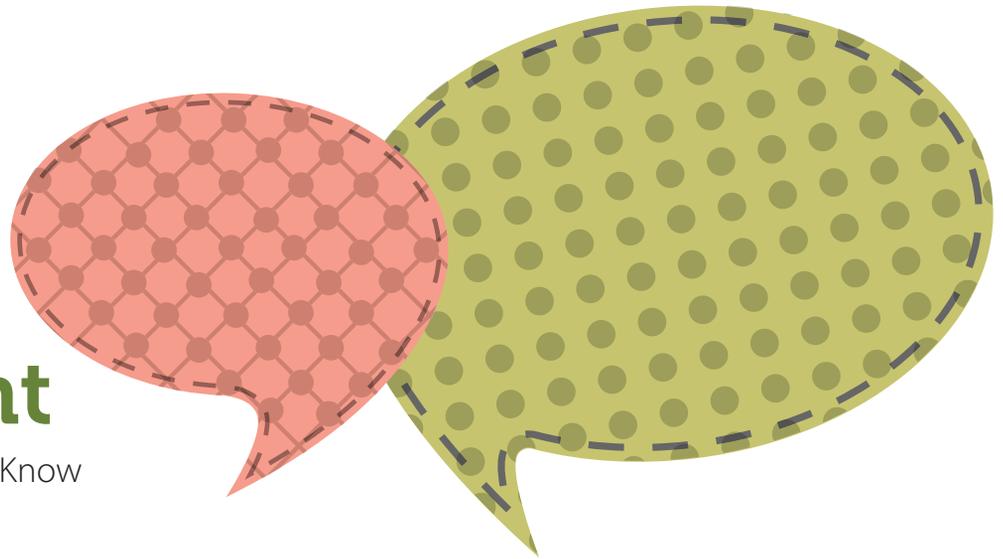


# Your Child's Speech and Language Development

Is There a Delay? What You Need to Know

By Gloria S. Lazar, M.S., M.Phil., CCC



**A**long with a child's first steps, the first spoken word surely ranks as one of the high points in a parent's life. Those first words – along with early phrases – stay in a parent's mind. Later, we take for granted the physical and intellectual feats that children exhibit on a regular basis, but those first words, usually 10 to 20 by 18 months, are truly spectacular. What happens after the first words?

## DEVELOPING VOCABULARY

By age 2, most children have a vocabulary of 150 to 300 words and speak in two-word combinations and short phrases. By 30 months, a toddler will have a vocabulary of 500 words. At 3, children typically possess an expressive vocabulary of 900 words, speak in 3 to 4 word phrases or short sentences consisting of a subject, verb and object, specifying color, size and other attributes with adjectives and adverbs. The average 3-year-old understands 1,200 words and has mastered the basics of English grammar. Normal speech and language develops from listening and repetition, as well as fulfilling needs, an early stage of "language pragmatics."

Between ages 3 and 4 a critical shift in speech and language development takes place. At 4 your child has a vocabulary of 1,500 words and can have long, detailed conversations. Children at this age use some irregular verbs such as "ran" and "fell." Your child can answer "why" questions, repeat words of four syllables, understand spatial concepts, for example, "behind, next to" and prepositions, including "over/under." Comparisons, "larger" and "longer," and differences such as "rougher/smoother" are part of the developing comprehension of language. At 4, children should be able to pronounce all the vowels and the majority of consonants so that speech is 90 percent intelligible, in spite of some misarticulations, especially of longer words.

At 5, children have a vocabulary of 1,900 words, can repeat sentences as long as nine words and can follow three-step commands. At this point speech is completely intelligible in spite of possible misarticulations of later developing sounds. Most importantly, a 5-year-old can relate a simple story in

sequence with specific details, for example, the events in *Goldilocks and the Three Bears*.

## SPEECH VS LANGUAGE

For parents, understanding the difference between "speech" and "language," a distinction made by speech-language pathologists (SLP's) who specialize in this area, is very important. The term "language" has two components: receptive language, an understanding of what is spoken, and expressive language, the words, phrases, grammar the child uses. "Speech" refers to the articulation of these words, or what is commonly called diction. A child's language skills relate to his understanding and choice of words/phrases to express needs, wants and observations, while articulation refers to the use of standard pronunciation so he can be understood.

While some children may progress faster or slower, the pattern of development takes place in a fairly prescribed way: Children who are not using single words and phrases to express needs and desires by age 2 to 2 1/2, will not catch up and speak in complete sentences with basic grammar by 3, the age at which most children begin preschool. Receptive and expressive language skills become necessities for enabling children to navigate the social and academic worlds they enter between ages 3 and 5 – preschool followed by Kindergarten.

## WHEN TO BE CONCERNED

When should parents become concerned about their child's speech and language development? If a child does not begin to babble in the first year, it becomes important to have a hearing test to rule out a medical issue. If by 2 1/2, a child does not seem to follow simple requests or does not make needs known by words and short phrases, an evaluation by a licensed, speech-language pathologist is appropriate.

Stuttering, the repetition of sounds and words, sometimes accompanied by eye blinking and other facial and neck symptoms, presents a special area of concern. Many children experience a period of normal dysfluency, generally between the ages of 2 and 3, when their speech is notable for the

repetition of sounds at the beginning of words. But true stuttering has clear markers in the child's speech pattern that a professional can diagnose. Research confirms a genetic link in families that may predispose a child to become a stutterer, especially in males. This fact makes it important for parents with a family history who question whether their child is stuttering to have a fluency evaluation by an experienced speech-language pathologist as early as age 3. Early therapy with a speech pathologist can change this pattern before it escalates to a life-long problem.

## EARLY INTERVENTION

In New York State, a child younger than 3 can be evaluated through the Early Intervention Office at the county level, while older than 3, the Preschool Committee on Special Education in each school district can arrange for an assessment. If a child qualifies by showing a significant delay, speech and language therapy services will be provided by the county or school district, either in the home or school. If parents prefer to have their child evaluated privately, or if a child does not qualify for speech services at the county/school district level, they can consult a speech language pathologist who is licensed to practice in New York State and holds certification by the American Speech-Hearing Association (ASHA), designated by the initials, CCC, after the professional's name. ASHA maintains a directory of its members in each state and town.

If an evaluation reveals that your child has some delays, therapy by a professional can make a critical difference. Parents who supplement therapy by reading aloud, singing nursery rhymes, and most importantly, engaging in conversation with their child, will be assisting the process in critical ways. For all children, these activities enrich language development and help your child become a better communicator.

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