

Introduction

When it comes to speech and language, the first five years of life are filled with excitement. The communication skills your child develops during this time will have a major impact on your child's experiences throughout his or her life... at school, in relationships, at work, and in day to day life. And as a parent, there's a great deal you can do to help support your child's language development.

But how do you know if your child's communication skills are developing on track? The first step is to know what your child should be able to do at each stage... each of these accomplishments is called a milestone.

Think of every milestone as being built on building blocks. After each milestone is reached... the foundation is laid for the next one. The more blocks you have, the more solid your structure.

This program will demonstrate some of the communication milestones your child should be reaching at about this age. It will also show you how to give your child the Building Blocks needed to help him or her reach those milestones.

Milestones: 6 to 12 months

- Babbles using different sounds like “ma”, “mu”, “da”, “ba”.
- Takes turns making sounds with you.
- Understands “no”.
- Looks across the room to something you point to, such as a toy or ball.
- Gets your attention using sounds, gestures and pointing while looking at your eyes.
- “Shows” you something that interests her by shifting her attention from it... to you... and then back to it again.
- Uses gestures to communicate... for example, waves “bye bye” or shakes head “no”.

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- Uses an expressive vocabulary of 2 to 8 words or sound effects. For example, “no”, “baby”, “moo” or “woof”.
- Shows interest in simple picture books.

These are some of the milestones your baby should be reaching by her first birthday, but it’s important to remember that every child is unique and will reach milestones at his or her own pace.

However, some babies have difficulty developing normal speech and language skills, and may need extra help from a specialist. It’s important for these children to get help early to prevent more problems later on, and so that they can reach their fullest potential. Be sure to speak with your healthcare provider if your baby doesn’t look at you... doesn’t try to express sounds or words... doesn’t show interest in objects... doesn’t show emotions like anger, fear or joy... has recurring ear infections... or if you have any other concerns about your child’s development.

Now let’s look at some important ways that you as a parent can help your baby continue to build her communication skills...

Building blocks: 6 to 12 months

By 12 months of age, your baby will be able to understand a lot more than she can say. As a parent, you may be given quite a bit of advice on the latest must-have gadgets and toys to help promote your little one’s speech. But you don’t need all the latest technology. In fact, the most important way you can support your baby’s developing communication skills, is to use the following simple building blocks with her:

Talk... talk... and talk some more! At this stage, you can’t talk too much to your baby. Although she may not respond, she is listening to everything you say. So talk to your baby about everything that you’re doing! Just a word of caution, though – don’t fall into the trap of baby talk. Some parents may think it’s easier for their baby to learn “wawa” instead of “water” or “baba” instead of “bottle”. But all they’re doing is teaching their baby that “wawa” and “baba” are the right terms. This can make it really hard for the baby to later break the habit of using “baby talk”. An easy way to remember this is to ask yourself if it’s a word you would use with an adult.

When you’re teaching your baby a new word, try to combine that word with a gesture. For example when saying the word “eat” try taking your hand up to your mouth. For the word “go”, try pointing your finger in the direction you want your little one to go. By using gestures, you’re helping your baby understand the meaning of the word. Plus, because she may not be able to form the words yet, you’re giving her another way to ask for things she wants. In this next clip, watch as mom waves “hello” while she says “hi kitty cat”.

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When talking to your baby, use simple sentences. This will help your baby understand the words and how they can be used together. Instead of saying “The puppy is dirty because he played in the mud,” try saying “The puppy is dirty.” By keeping the sentences short, you’re making it much easier for your baby to understand and imitate what you’re saying.

Encourage your child’s interest in books. Soft cloth and sturdy board books with thick pages are perfect for her little hands—plus these types of books resist chewing, drooling and tearing. You can also try books with sounds, fun nursery rhymes and big colourful images as they’re sure to capture her attention. When she points at or looks at an image... name it.

By associating the name of the object with the image... you’re helping her to connect the two, which is an important step in her language development.

Repetition is one key factor when it comes to your baby figuring out what words actually mean. If your baby sees a cat and you point to the cat saying 'cat'... your baby may not understand what you are trying to communicate. But, if every time you see a cat you say “cat”... your baby will eventually associate the word 'cat' with that furry animal with pointy ears and a pink nose.

By responding when your baby babbles, you’re encouraging the use of sounds. You can have a conversation without words. To get started, look right at your baby and smile. Let her babble, imitate her sounds, and then pause to let her have a chance to answer. This type of interaction is also a great way to help her learn that taking turns is an important part of communication.

Simple games like “Peek-a-boo”, songs like “head, shoulders knees and toes” and nursery rhymes like “pat-a-cake” are repetitive, fun to hear and can even encourage your little one to try to sing or play along. What’s nice is that you can do many of these songs, rhymes and games anywhere... in the tub, at the store or in the car. To keep your baby’s attention try changing things up by varying your tone of voice.

Although your baby’s vocabulary is growing, it is still limited. But, there is one word your baby should recognize right away... her name! Continue to use your baby’s name when you speak to her as you will encourage her to respond to it. When other people are around your baby, it’s also a good idea to use their names too. By saying things like: “Aunt Jennifer wants a hug”, your baby will be able to understand that not everybody is called Mommy or Daddy... and that each person and even each pet has its own name.

Does your baby have a favourite toy? Use that toy as a communication tool. Watch as mom follows Anna’s lead while they play with toys.

When your baby likes a certain toy, it gives you a chance to talk about the names of the toy. In that clip, we saw mom and Anna playing with a farm and animals. Talking as you play with toys, naming the various animals and even imitating their sounds is a great learning opportunity. But remember to keep it light and fun – the goal is to keep her interest... by following what she’s interested in.

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Conclusion

In this program, we've reviewed some of the milestones your child should reach at about this age, and some simple ways that you can support his or her growing communication skills.

You're encouraged to return to this resource at each step of your child's development. And remember: if at any stage you have concerns about your child's speech and language development, don't hesitate to talk to your healthcare provider. By using the simple tips we've discussed in this program, and by getting help for any communication problems early, you can help pave the way for your child's future success!

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