



Information for parents

How can I help my child's communication to develop?

Many parents ask “how can I help my child's communication to develop?” Children learn language through play and interaction with their families and peers. In fact, evidence suggests that infants prefer speech sounds over other sounds even before birth! Babies' interaction with the environment is crucial in their learning of language. Long before a child starts to talk, the child is learning to communicate through eye contact, crying (a different cry for hunger or for pain), smiling, laughing and gesture. In daily routines (e.g feeding, bathing and play activities), a child is developing communication skills. To develop adequate skills in communication children need to be able to pay attention and listen to sounds, words and people talking *and* to be able to understand and use gestures, sounds and words.

Typical stages of speech and language development in children

Remember: while there are norms for language and communication development, parents should be reassured that there is wide variation in typical development.

- Typically babies make sounds from birth to show hunger, pain or pleasure.
- Early forms of communication include sounds and gestures.
- Babies' understanding of words develops (8-10 months) before they use their first words (approximately 12-18 months)
- By two years children may be using short two-word sentences (e.g. “drink gone”, “bye bye daddy”)
- Their understanding of language progresses rapidly over the period from 12 month to 3 years: from understanding names of familiar objects, they will move to understanding simple questions, words like “hot/cold” “in” and “on” and longer instructions: (e.g. “Put your jumper on and get your bag”)
- From combining two words at approximately 2 years, as children get older, their sentences get longer, they will ask many questions, and use of endings on words e.g. ..Shoesor he “jumped” will become more accurate. .
- While understanding and use of words and sentences is increasing, children's pronunciation of speech sounds also develops. Early on, children substitute speech sounds when they are learning to talk (e.g. a child might pronounce “car” as “tar”) By three years of age, people familiar to the child should understand him most of the time.
- From 3 to 5 years, children learn to understand more difficult words e.g. those referring to time and place such as “behind”, “morning”, “before”. They will use longer sentences, combining ideas with words like “and” “because” and

- “but”. By around five years, children can answer simple questions about a story and their stories will have the main ideas in the right order. Their speech will be clearly understood by strangers by five years of age.
- While it is recognised that much speech, language and communication development has taken place by the time a child enters primary school, language learning is a life time process and children continue to acquire language through the school-age and adolescent years.
 - From about 7- 8 years onwards children acquire as much language through reading as they do through verbal interaction. New vocabulary, complex grammar, and the ability to use language to reason, negotiate and persuade others all continue to develop.

What can you do as a parent?

Remember communication begins long before words are spoken!

- Get face to face with your baby! Your child learns to read your cues long before he /she understands the words you are using. Your child will tune into your facial expressions and you will be able to notice what your child is interested in and respond to it.
- Normal routines, such as feeding, dressing and bath time, are ideal opportunities for your child to understand and learn new words. The shared attention between you and your child and the repetition that takes place in these situations, is very helpful. Playing games such as peek-a-boo, ball play and sound play e.g. nursery rhymes/songs are important activities for speech and language development.
- It is helpful to comment and talk about what is happening (e.g. oh look! John is having juice! I am having my sandwich) rather than asking too many questions e.g. (What's that? what are you doing John?)
- Playing alongside your child and copying what they are doing, including their sounds, encourages interaction, learning and turn taking. You can also expand on, or add to what the child says (e.g. child says “baba”, you say “you want your bottle?”)
- Introduce reading together from an early age. Use age appropriate books, and develop your child's attention skills by sitting down together, looking at pictures and pointing to and naming them. As they get older, and attention span increases, reading to your child is very beneficial.

When might I refer my child to a speech and language therapist?

If in doubt, trust your instinct as a parent and ask for a referral to your local speech and language therapist.

These are some of the reasons why you may choose to do so:

- Your child has difficulties understanding instructions compared to other children
- Your child is late in development of talking,
- Your child has a hoarse voice
- Your child has a stammer/stutter
- Your child finds playing with peers challenging or is not interested in interacting with you or others;
- Your child is 3 and you are having difficulty understanding his/her speech.

Helpful websites

www.iaslt.ie (Irish association of speech and language therapists)

www.iasltp.com (Irish association of speech and language therapists in private practice)