



First Steps

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Learning to Use Words

Our children do not come with instructions. Parents Reaching Out provides resources that help families make informed decisions about the care and education of their children. We thank the Parent Education Network, a project of Parents Helping Parents of Wyoming, Inc. for permitting us to share their *Thoughts for Tots* in this information series.

Learning to talk is one of the key developments of a child's first three years and is very important to normal social, emotional, and intellectual growth. Babies start learning language long before they can say any words. The rate at which individual children learn to talk varies widely. Talking to infants plays an important part in their language development. It not only helps them to learn the rhythms, patterns, and sounds of speech, but also gives the idea that talking is a pleasant social activity. It is important to spend time talking directly to babies and looking at them while you talk so they feel they have your undivided attention.

Source: Meredith, R. Gee & S., *Entertaining & Educating Babies & Toddlers*

What are the normal stages of communication development?

(Individual children's development varies; this is just a guideline for parents.)

By 3 months, a child usually

- will coo or cry to communicate needs
- is quieted by hearing a familiar voice
- reacts to a voice by appearing to listen

By 6 months, a child usually

- babbles and gurgles
- smiles and laughs in response to voices
- enjoys music or songs
- begins to recognize words like "mama" or "dada"

By 9 months, a child usually

- understands "no" and a few other words
- reacts when his/her name is spoken
- recognizes words that go with a gesture such as "hi" with a wave
- follows simple verbal directions, like "wave bye-bye"
- makes noises that sound like words such as "mama" or "dada"

- speak actual words, although maybe not correctly (like "ba" for "ball")
- indicate needs and wants with sounds and gestures
- respond with a suitable verbal response to requests like "Say daddy", and the child says "dada"

By age 2, a child may

- say most letter sounds (harder letters like r, l, s, k, may not be accurate yet)
- speak clearly at least half the time
- be able to ask 2-word questions like "Where ball?" or "What's that?" or "Mommy go?"
- put two or more words together like "Birdie go" or "kitty jump up"
- understand about 300 words



By age 1, a child may



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By age 3, a child may

- understand two-step commands, like “Find the ball and bring it to me.”
- speak in 3-5 word sentences
- correctly name and/or describe common objects, like “big elephant”
- understand about 900 words and speak about 200 words clearly ask and answer simple questions

By age 4,

- a child ought to use longer sentences
- speak so that non-family members can easily understand what he/she is saying

- talk about things that happen away from home (at pre-school, with friends, on outings, etc.)
- understand and follow 2 and 3-step requests (“Please go to the shelf, find a book, and bring it to me to read to you.”)

By age 5, a child ought to

- understand up to 2,800 words and use up to 2,000 words
- use longer sentences
- say most letter sounds correctly
- comfortably communicate with his/her playmates as well as with adults whom they know

Strategies Parents Can Use to Encourage Speech Development

- Talk to your infant from the first moment you hold him or her. Let your baby hear your voice and be comforted by it.
- The more you talk to your baby, the more he or she will begin to hear the natural rhythm of speech. Talk in sentences, and try to avoid “baby talk”. Instead of saying “Mommy feed you”, say “Mommy is going to feed you now”.
- When you are doing something for the baby, such as bathing or changing a diaper, talk to him about what you are doing. Say “Let’s take this wet diaper off and put a dry one on. That will make you feel good.”
- Sing children’s songs and repeat nursery rhymes so your toddler hears repeated words and rhythms.
- Ask your baby questions (even though you will also supply the answers for her). “Do you want a warm bath? Of course you do!”
- Show the baby things and describe them to him, explaining what they are for. “Here is your rattle. Let’s make noise with it.”
- When your child is old enough to sit up and watch you, you can provide an explanation of what you are doing—and maybe why. “I’m making a cake for our dinner.”
- If your child points to an object, say “That’s a cup. Say ‘cup’.” Hand him/her the cup.
- If you ask a toddler a question, wait for his/her answer—give time to think.
- Read to your child every day! Talk about the pictures so your child learns the words that go with the pictures.



You want your child to be good communicator. You are the very best person to show him or her the meaning of words and how to use them. The earlier you begin, the sooner your child will be able to communicate well—all lifelong!

For more information call Parents Reaching Out. We offer phone consultations and provide workshops in English or Spanish to communities throughout New Mexico. This publication was developed under a grant from the New Mexico Department of Health Family Infant Toddler program. However, the views here expressed do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and should not be assumed to be an endorsement by the New Mexico Department of Health.