



How Language Develops & How You Can Support It

*A practical guide for learning about & supporting
your child's communication from 0-5 years*



Welcome! 🖐️ ✨

Language development is one of the most exciting parts of your child's early years 🧠💬.

And here's the best part — you don't need fancy flashcards or apps to help your child communicate. Just your voice, your attention, and your everyday routines 🍼💧🧸.

This guide is here to help you understand how language typically develops 📈, and give you simple, research-backed strategies to support it — starting today 💛.

How Language Develops



Language includes everything from gestures, expectant waiting, turn taking eye contact, and understanding words... to speaking, making requests, asking questions, and telling stories. Here's a look at how it usually unfolds:

0–6 Months: Foundations for Language

- ★ Responds to familiar voices
- ★ Watches your mouth and face while you talk
- ★ Takes turns in early "conversations" (you speak, they coo)
- ★ Smiles and uses sounds to connect.

6–12 Months: Babble, Gesture, Understand

- ★ Babbles with more variety ("bababa", "dadada")
- ★ Understands familiar names, routines, and words like "no"
- ★ Looks at objects or people when named
- ★ Begins using gestures (pointing, waving, reaching).

12–24 Months: First Words & Meaningful Communication

- ★ Vocabulary steadily grows
- ★ Understands simple instructions
- ★ Begins combining two words ("more milk", "daddy go")
- ★ Uses language to ask, label, request, and protest.

2–4 Years: Explosive Growth

- ★ Uses longer phrases and sentences
- ★ Asks lots of questions (what, who, where)
- ★ Understands basic concepts (big/small, on/under, colours, categories)
- ★ Plays with language in stories, songs, and pretend play.

4–5 Years: Expressing Ideas & Following Stories

- ★ Understands time words (before, after), directions, and stories
- ★ Tells simple stories with beginning, middle, and end
- ★ Uses a wide range of vocabulary and grammar (past/future tense, joining words)
- ★ Takes turns in conversations.

You'll find a detailed milestone chart on the next page.

By 1 year	Understands <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands simple commands (e.g., no, stop). Recognises familiar names and words (mama, dada, ball). Understands their name. Recognises different sounds. 	Says <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Babbling. Might have some simple words or approximations of words that might not be complete but that you understand. Still using gestures more than words.
By 2 years	Understands <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Follows 2-part instructions (give me the car and the book"). Understands simple 'wh' questions (what, who). Recognises several body parts (eyes, nose etc.) Understands some prepositions (in, on top). 	Says <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 40+ words. Simple 2-word combinations ("no ball", "bye mummy"). Mainly nouns and some simple verbs.
By 3 years	Understands <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Understands more complex instructions ("give me the car and kick the ball"). Understands basic concepts (big/ small, same/different). Recognises basic colours. Understands basic categories (e.g., can sort toy animals from toy food etc.) Understands more wh questions (what, who, where). 	Says <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Too many words to count. Uses 4–5-word sentences. Ask questions (what, where, who). Uses different types of words (nouns, verbs, descriptors etc.)

By 4 years

Understands

- Understands most 'wh' questions (who, where, when, what, what happened).
- Recognises some numbers.
- Understands complex instructions (get the ball and put it under the chair).
- Begins to understand some letters and their sounds.

Says

- Uses 5+ word sentences.
- Uses joining words (and, but, because).
- Can describe daily routines (bedtime, brushing teeth).
- Ask lots of 'wh' questions.
- Can name basic colours (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, black, white).
- Uses personal pronouns (mine, yours).

By 5 years

Understands

- Understands time related words (before, after, now, later).
- Understands complex 3-part instructions (wash your hands, get your coat, and wait by the door).
- Recognises more numbers.
- Continues to recognise letters and their sounds.

Says



- Tells simple stories with beginning, middle, end, timeline, and characters.
- Uses well-formed sentences with different types of words and correct grammatical rules.
- Uses simple past and future tenses (went, will go).

Everyday Strategies to Support Language

You don't need special flashcards or sit-down lessons to build language. Some of the most powerful strategies happen in everyday moments — at mealtimes, during play, or while getting dressed. These tips are simple, practical, and backed by research.

Talk About What You're Doing

Turn your daily routines into running commentary. Describe your actions out loud as you go about them.


"Let's open the fridge ... ooh, yoghurt!  I'm putting it in your bowl now."

This helps your child connect words with real-life experiences, and builds vocabulary in context.

Repeat & Reuse Words

Children need to hear words many times before they learn and use them.

Don't be afraid to sound like a broken record — repetition helps their brain make connections. Try using the same word in a few different ways:

"Ball!  Roll the ball. The ball is under the table! Big ball!"

This strengthens word understanding and encourages them to use it, too.

Follow Their Lead

Let your child's focus guide the interaction. If they're playing with a toy truck, talk about that, not something else.

"You've got the truck! 🚚 It's going fast! Oh no, it crashed!"

Following their interests makes communication more meaningful — and they're more likely to tune in.

+ Use the "1-Up" Rule

Take what your child says and gently expand it by just one word.

This helps grow their sentences without pressure.

Child: "Dog!" 🐕

You: "Big dog!"

Child: "Car go!" 🚗

You: "Red car go!"

It models richer language and gives them a scaffold to try longer phrases.

⏸ Pause & Wait

After asking a question or saying something, pause... and count to 5 in your head.

Children need more time to process and respond.

If we jump in too quickly, we can accidentally take away their chance to try.

This small pause sends a message:

"I'm listening. I'm giving you space to talk."

Read, Sing & Play Together

Books, songs, and pretend play are language goldmines.

Reading builds vocabulary, songs teach rhythm and memory, and play builds social communication.

Even 5–10 minutes a day adds up. Point to pictures and name them.

Let your child turn the pages. Make animal noises 🐷 or silly voices!

When to Seek Support

Every child develops at their own pace — and it's completely normal for kids to reach milestones at slightly different times. But sometimes, early support can make a big difference. It's not about labelling or worrying unnecessarily — it's about giving your child the best chance to thrive



Here are a few signs that may suggest checking in with a speech pathologist:



By 12 months

- Not babbling (e.g. "baba", "gaga")
- Doesn't respond to sounds or voices



By 15 months

- No clear word approximations (even if they're not perfect!)
- Limited use of gestures like pointing, waving, or reaching
- Doesn't look when you name familiar things



By 2 years

- Not combining two words (e.g. "more juice", "mummy go")
- Very limited vocabulary
- Hard to understand, even for familiar adults
- Doesn't follow simple directions like "get your shoes"





Any age

- You feel like your child is frustrated because they can't communicate
- You're finding it hard to understand what they're trying to tell you
- They've lost words or skills they previously had.



Trust your instincts.

If something doesn't feel quite right, it's okay to check in — even if your child is still young. You don't need to wait for a referral, or for things to get worse. Early support is all about giving your child the tools they need to connect, express, and thrive  .