The Sound of Speech: 0 to 3 years

The ages and stages of children's speech development

Speech Pathology Australia

Learning to speak is a crucial part of a child's development and the most intensive period of speech and language development happens in the first three years of life.

Even though children vary in their development of speech and language, there are certain 'milestones' that can be identified as a rough guide to normal development. Typically, these skills must be reached at certain ages before more complex skills can be learned. These milestones help speech pathologists determine if a child may need extra help to learn to speak or use language.

Babies: 0-1 year

During their first year, children develop the ability to hear and recognise the sounds of their parents' language. They experiment with sounds by babbling (e.g. "baba", "babamada"), and over time, their babbling begins to sound more and more like real words.

What can most babies do?

- Between 0-3 months babies communicate by crying, cooing, smiling, and making eye contact
- Between 3-6 months babies communicate by crying, cooing, smiling, making eye contact, pointing, blowing raspberries and laughing
- Between 6-9 months babies communicate by babbling, using sounds made with the lips (e.g. b and m) in sequences like "baba" and later "bamada"
- Between 9-12 months babies communicate by babbling, using more sounds (e.g. d, m, n, h, w, t)
- Around 12 months babies begin to use words

What do many babies still find difficult?

Babies can't say words the same way as adults do and often simplify words (e.g. biscuit becomes "bi").

How can parents help?

Children who do not progress through this stage of "playing with sounds" are at risk of speech difficulties later. Parents can help by talking to their infants and responding to any attempts by their infants to communicate (e.g. by copying their babbling). For information about helping your baby to talk, see the "**Helping your baby to talk**" fact sheet.

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Toddlers: 1-3 years

Toddlers experience a huge development in speech sounds and triple the number of words they can say between 1and 2 years of age. As a result, their speech becomes easier to understand. At 2 years, half of their speech should be understood, and at 3 years, most of their speech should be understood by family and friends.

What can most toddlers do?

- By 2 years, toddlers can say a range of speech sounds when talking (e.g. p, b, m, t, d, n, h, w)
- By 3 years, toddlers can say even more sounds (e.g. k, g, f, s, ng)

What do many toddlers still find difficult?

Many toddlers have difficulty saying sounds correctly all the time. Some words are more difficult than others for children to say, so they may make some sound errors (e.g. "tat" for cat and "pam" for pram). Sometimes, children can be more difficult to understand when they are using longer sentences.

What can parents do to help?

Parents can continue to help their toddler's speech development by modelling the correct way of saying words, particularly when children make occasional sound errors. However, if a toddler's speech is very difficult for parents to understand, or if children are using gestures (and grunts) in place of words, parents should contact a speech pathologist for further advice. If parents are concerned about their child's speech development, they are advised to have their child's hearing checked by an audiologist, as hearing is important in learning how to say sounds correctly.

For more information about speech development in preschool children, see the fact sheet **"The Sounds of Speech: preschool and school aged children"**.

If your child doesn't meet these milestones…

If you are worried about your child's speech, if your child sounds different to the ages and stages outlined or if your three year old cannot be understood by adults, you may need to seek help from a speech pathologist.

A speech pathologist has been professionally trained to advise, diagnose and work with adults and children who have difficulty in communicating. Speech pathologists work in a variety of settings including schools, health centres, hospitals and private practice. Your child health nurse or GP can put you in contact with a speech pathologist.

How do I become a speech pathologist?
Speech pathology is an accredited undergraduate or entry level masters degree. To find out more go to www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/education-and-careers/university-courses

How do I find a speech pathologist in my area?
Go to www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au and click on "Find a Speech Pathologist".

For further information contact **Speech Pathology Australia** – the national peak body representing speech pathologists, the professionals who work with and advocate for people who have a communication disability and all Australian consumers of speech pathology services.