

Speech milestones: how children learn to talk



Highlights

- Learning to talk is a key part of child development
- Babies observe, listen, and interact to learn communication
- Crying and babbling help babies practice speech
- Language skills grow gradually with age and interaction
- Talking, reading, and play support early language learning

In This Article

- How children begin learning to talk
- Milestones from birth to 6 months
- Key changes between 6 and 24 months
- Language development between ages 3 and 5
- Simple ways to support speech at home
- When delays may signal a need for support
- Tools and Assistance

How children begin learning to talk

Babies start developing communication skills by closely watching and listening

to the people around them. From the first days, they are:

Attuned to familiar voices

Watching facial expressions

Listening to words and tone during everyday conversation

This early exposure lays the foundation for speech.

Milestones from birth to 6 months

Language development begins with non-verbal communication:

Crying signals needs and emotions

Early sounds include cooing, gurgling, laughing, and raspberries

Babies start making eye contact and showing facial expressions

Gestures like pointing may also begin to appear

These cues mark the start of intentional communication.

Key changes between 6 and 24 months

As babies grow, speech skills become more active and advanced:

From 6 to 9 months:

Babbling begins with repeated sounds like "baba"

Some babies start to wave or gesture intentionally

From 9 to 12 months:

Babbling becomes more varied and speech-like

First simple words may appear, such as "mama" or "dada"

Babies begin to recognize their name and respond to simple requests

From 12 to 24 months:

Vocabulary increases with clearer words like "ball" or "dog"

Simple two-word phrases may develop

By age 2, toddlers may use up to 50 words and understand many more

Language development between ages 3 and 5

During preschool years, children make big strides in speech:

Between 3 and 4 years:

They ask more questions and use longer sentences

Pretend play and storytelling become common

Children notice rhymes and enjoy patterns in books

Speech becomes easier to understand

Between 4 and 5 years:

Children use more complex language and humor

They may invent stories or words

Most can say their name, age, and even address

Clear conversations with adults are common

Simple ways to support speech at home

Parents and caregivers play a central role in speech development. You can help by:

Speaking clearly and using your child's name often

Repeating and encouraging their sounds and words

Showing interest and responding to their communication efforts

Naming everyday objects and actions

Praising their attempts to speak

Maintaining eye contact so they can see your mouth move

Reading books with bright images and talking about the pictures

When delays may signal a need for support

Speech and hearing are closely connected. Watch for signs that may suggest a developmental concern:

Lack of response to voices or sounds
Limited babbling or vocalizations by 6 months
Uneven body strength or movement
Weak eye contact or limited interest in interaction
Persistent stuttering
Body posture that appears stiff or floppy

If you notice any of these signs, speaking to a healthcare professional can provide clarity and support.

Tools and Assistance

Watch for developmental signs and seek early help when needed
Use daily routines as opportunities for talk and naming objects
Keep background noise low to help babies focus on speech
Engage in short, frequent conversations
Read colorful books aloud every day
Respond to sounds and gestures as valid communication