

Talking with toddlers: How to support early communication



Highlights

Toddlers develop language by observing and interacting with people around them
Talking, playing, and reading together builds strong communication skills
Everyday conversations help children understand and use new words
Positive attention and a safe environment support confident communication
Each child learns at their own pace, but general milestones can help track progress

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Understanding toddler communication

Toddlers are naturally expressive and eager to connect with those around them. As they grow, they begin to:

- Make their speech easier to understand
- Form clearer and more connected sentences
- Communicate their needs using both words and gestures

At this stage, their understanding often exceeds what they can say. It's normal for toddlers to experience frustration or express themselves through tantrums - these behaviors reflect their growing desire to communicate.

How children learn to talk

Language skills develop as children:

- Watch and listen to people around them
- Repeat sounds and words they hear
- Receive responses from adults and siblings
- Engage with peers and other children

You can support their language development through regular conversations and by giving them space to speak, repeat, and explore language.

Making everyday talk meaningful

There's no perfect way to talk to toddlers. The most effective approach is one that follows their lead and responds to their curiosity.

Tips to connect through conversation:

- Talk during everyday moments like driving or eating
- Use a wide variety of words (not just object names)
- Describe actions, emotions, and surroundings
- Let your toddler guide the topic of conversation
- Respond patiently, even to unclear speech

These daily interactions are valuable for building vocabulary and helping your

child feel heard and supported.

Creating a language-friendly environment

The right setting can encourage toddlers to communicate confidently. Try to:

Include your child in family conversations

Share meals together without distractions

Speak the language you're most fluent in-bilingual children can learn both languages effectively

Foster emotional safety by listening and encouraging open dialogue

Use interactive tools such as:

Toys that promote pretend play

Books, songs, and games with repetition

Visits to the library or regular reading time

Encouraging confident communication

Your communication style shapes your child's development. You can support them by:

Asking questions about their day or feelings

Encouraging them to express their opinions

Praising their ideas and speech attempts

Giving older siblings space to let younger children talk

Naming emotions to help them understand what they feel

Minimize background distractions and offer your full attention during conversations.

Language development milestones

Each child grows at their own pace, but here are typical milestones:

Toddlers (12-18 months):

Say 6-20 words \ (like "no," "mama," "ball")
Babble and make sounds
Point to objects when named

Around 2 years:

Say around 50 words
Combine two words
Begin asking for things
Try new sounds

Preschoolers \ (4-5 years\):

Ask "why," "what," and "when"
Use short sentences
Have conversations with others
Say most words clearly
Know their name, age, and address

When to seek professional advice

It's helpful to talk to a health professional if your child:

Isn't reaching expected milestones
Struggles to be understood
Rarely talks or interacts with others
Avoids eye contact or seems withdrawn
Frequently has ear infections or trouble hearing
Has persistent stuttering or speech regression

Early support from a speech pathologist can strengthen communication skills and boost confidence.

Tools and Assistance

Stay patient and curious - each child develops at their own pace
Observe and talk to your child throughout the day - every moment is a learning opportunity

Turn off background noise when speaking to help them focus on your voice
Use storytelling, reading, and songs as regular language-building activities
Play simple games that involve turn-taking and naming objects or actions
Offer comfort and praise during communication attempts, even if speech is unclear