

Tip Sheets

Infants and Toddlers: Red Flags in the Development of Communication Skills

Speech and language are learned and acquired in stages. Infants and toddlers move from one stage to the next as they generalize what they have learned from earlier learning experiences to new learning experiences.

Although stages are often given a specific age range in which the development of the skills of that stage are expected, the age of the child is much less important than observing that the child is making progress from one stage to the next.

Development of Communication Skills

The development of communication skills involves:

- Learning to produce sounds
- Pronunciation
- Acquiring words
- Putting words into sentences

Infants begin using speech sounds when babbling. Their first utterances will generally begin with the sounds that are easiest for them to distinguish in the speech they hear and articulate.

All children are unique, and different children will find different sounds easier or more difficult to produce. Remember, the key is in observing that the child is making progress.

As children acquire words, in order to make these words easier to produce, they may:

- Modify sounds
- Replace sounds
- Add and remove parts of words

Red Flags: When to be Concerned

0 – 18 Months

- Infant does not cry or attempt to get needs met in other ways
- Infant does not appear to understand or respond to language by 12 months of age
- Child has not said a clear word with a recognizable meaning by 18 months
- Child uses fewer than 50 words

18 – 24 months

- Child has not said first sentence by the age of 3 years
- Child's speech and language development has regressed or stopped
- Child has persistent hoarseness (when not ill)
- Child is observed to be disinterested in communication (even if shy)
- Child has little or no eye contact
- Child consistently appears aloof or indifferent with people
- Child consistently responds by echoing all or part of what was said

For example, a child may substitute the *L* sound for *Y* because it is easier to say—such as in saying *lellow* for *yellow*. Another child might call a *truck* a *ruck* because multiple consonants used together are more difficult—such as is *tr*, *shr*, or *spl*. This is typical of children's learning of speech and language throughout the world.

As children begin to put words together to form sentences many will attempt to say too many words at one time which may mean that what they are saying is difficult to understand. Others may begin to stammer or appear to stutter because they are cognitively processing faster than they are able to produce words or simply due to lack of experience and practice. Some children may suddenly begin to talk less until they have mastered how to breathe when they speak in long utterances.

Learning speech and language takes time and requires patience on the part of caregivers.

Additional Resources

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association
<http://www.asha.org>

Talking is Teaching
<http://talkingisteaching.org>

Too Small to Fail
<http://toosmall.org/community/resources>

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