

# SPEECH AND LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT AND DELAYS IN YOUNG CHILDREN

Written by Dr Kaylene Henderson, Child Psychiatrist

Babies are learning to communicate with us even from birth and begin to understand language soon after.

Speech and language development plays a critical role in children's social development, their behaviour, their learning of early literacy skills and in the development of their self-esteem.

## How you can encourage your child's speech and language development:

- **Start talking to your child at birth.** Children start to understand the language we use long before they can use it themselves. We can talk to our children about what we're doing and what our plans are for the day. The more children hear and see us speak with them, the quicker they will be able to learn to talk themselves.
- **Respond to your baby's coos and babbling** as your baby's attempts at conversation. Take turns listening and talking - you are already starting to teach your child important social skills.
- **Play simple games** with your baby like peek-a-boo. Play is a great opportunity for lots of face-to-face language-based interactions with your child.
- **When your child is talking to you, make sure you listen patiently** to what they are trying to say. Look at him and give him as long as he needs to speak. Make sure you **acknowledge** that you've heard your child and **provide answers** to questions when he is talking to you. Doing so will reinforce your child's efforts.
- **Read books out loud** to your baby or young child. Make this part of your daily routine and encourage a love of reading.
- **Ask questions, tell stories and sing** songs together.
- When your child is talking in single words or short sentences, repeat his comment or request as a full sentence, not to correct him but to **model the correct words or phrases** that you'd like him to learn, e.g. If your child says, 'milk?', you can

respond with, 'You would like some milk please? Sure.'

- Similarly when your child is learning about grammar and pronouns, don't criticise his mistakes, but instead **respond by modelling the correct grammar and pronoun use**, e.g. if your child says, 'me hungry', you can respond with, 'I am hungry. What would you like to eat?'



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## Normal developmental milestones for speech development:

**By the age of 1:** After months of babbling and gesturing, a child will usually say his first words at around the age of 1, e.g. 'Dada', 'Mama', 'Hi'.

**By 2 years of age:** By the age of 2, children can usually string at least 2 words together and will be learning more and more words every week.

**By 3 years of age:** 3-year-old children will have a word for just about everything and will usually be understood by familiar listeners such as family members.

**By 4 years of age:** By 4, children are generally understood by unfamiliar people outside of the family too. They speak in sentences and have a good use of grammar and pronouns (e.g. adding 's' sounds to indicate plurals; using 'I', 'me', 'we', 'they' etc).

**By 5 years of age:** Children can often hold conversations and tell a story by this age. They may still make mistakes with some of the harder speech sounds, such as 'r' and 'th'.

## When to be concerned:

If your child is not talking by 18 months, or if you're concerned any earlier, it's a good idea to seek the advice of your family doctor or child health specialist.

Often a doctor will suggest a hearing test. Even if your child had a hearing test at birth, this is still a good idea to make sure that ear infections since birth haven't affected your child's ability to correctly hear speech sounds. Depending on the findings, your child may then be referred to a speech therapist. Speech therapists have wonderful skills and programs to assist even very young children to develop the communication skills that they need.

To find out more about Dr Kaylene Henderson and her popular resources, go to:

[www.drkaylenehenderson.com](http://www.drkaylenehenderson.com). Or to download her online Advice Packs on a range of topics such as anxiety, resilience, school readiness and tantrums, head to A Dose of Awesomeness: [www.adoseofawesomeness.com](http://www.adoseofawesomeness.com).

