

What are speech and language and how you can support both in your children

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A child's ability to communicate with others requires both speech and language skills. Speech is the articulation of language, it is how sounds are made and formed into words. Language involves receiving and expressing information in a way that is meaningful.

A child with a language problem may be able to pronounce words well but be unable to put more than two words together. Another child's speech may be difficult to understand, but he or she may use words and phrases to express ideas. And another child may speak well but have difficulty following directions. Although problems in speech and language differ, they can also overlap.

Speech

Speech involves control and coordination of the articulators such as the jaw, tongue and lips. Sounds are made by the movement of the articulators to shape the air as it exits the mouth or nose. It is a very complex system that occurs at a remarkable speed.

Children develop their speech sounds over time. Early speech sounds are typically easier to form and later sounds require more refined movements. A child is often best understood by those most familiar with the child. However, by four years, a child's speech should be understandable to less familiar people such as a librarian or a bus driver. Please see the First Words website for specific information on speech sound milestones at www.firstwords.ca.

Strategies to support speech development

Parents and caregivers play a key role in the development of their children's speech.

1. Provide opportunities for your baby to vocalize. Vocal play and babbling are important steps toward later speech. Children who have a soother or bottle in their mouth too often will have less opportunity to explore their sounds.
2. Talk and sing to your baby. Children need to hear and distinguish speech sounds to develop clear speech.
3. Imitate your baby's sounds. This imitative turn-taking will eventually turn into meaningful conversations!
4. Listen closely to your child's speech. If you cannot understand his or her words try some of these techniques to ease frustration:
 - Show me
 - Tell me more
 - Repeat back the parts that you did understand
5. Try to model not correct. When your child says a word differently, model back the correct speech with emphasis on the difficult sounds.

Language

The ability to understand speech, gestures or words and commands is called receptive language. To make a message that others will understand involves expressive language. Language develops over time and involves the ability to understand and use words and sentences to communicate with others.

The most intensive period of language development occurs during the first three years, when the brain is developing and maturing. By twelve months, most children can understand a simple direction (sit down), say three to five words and wave goodbye. By age two, most children are able to point to body parts on request, follow two-part instructions (get the truck and give it to grandma), use 100-150 words and put two to four words together such as "more milk" or "truck go down." At ages three, four, and five, a child's vocabulary rapidly increases and he or she begins to master the rules or the grammar of the language.

Children vary in their development of language. There is, however, a natural progression of language milestones. Please see the First Words website for specific information on receptive and expressive language milestone expectations.

Strategies to support language development

1. Talk to your baby throughout your daily activities. Label what you see and do. It is never too early to start!
2. Follow your child's interest when you play. Play face-to-face and help build your child's understanding by providing the vocabulary for all they see and do.
3. Use natural gestures while you sing and interact. Explore finger play songs such as: *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* and *Itsy Bitsy Spider*. Children who use gestures early have been shown to have better language outcomes.
4. Read to your child. Look for age-appropriate books and talk about the pictures your child is interested in.
5. Use everyday situations to reinforce your child's language. Think of all the language activities one can explore while sorting the laundry: matching (same/not same socks), describing words (big/ little; dirty/clean; stripes/polka dots), pronouns (my/your pants) etc.

Whatever your child's age, recognizing speech and language problems early on is the best approach.

First Words speech and language screening clinics are located throughout Ottawa, they are free and no appointment is needed. For screening clinic information visit the website at www.firstwords.ca.

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