

Introduction

When it comes to speech and language, the first five years of life are filled with excitement. The communication skills your child develops during this time will have a major impact on your child's experiences throughout his or her life... at school, in relationships, at work, and in day to day life. And as a parent, there's a great deal you can do to help support your child's language development.

But how do you know if your child's communication skills are developing on track? The first step is to know what your child should be able to do at each stage... each of these accomplishments is called a milestone.

Think of every milestone as being built on building blocks. After each milestone is reached... the foundation is laid for the next one. The more blocks you have, the more solid your structure.

This program will demonstrate some of the communication milestones your child should be reaching at about this age. It will also show you how to give your child the Building Blocks needed to help him or her reach those milestones.

Milestones: 12 to 18 months

Between 12 to 18 months of age, your child is starting to make more sounds, and is using some words. Although you may not understand everything he is saying... your words of encouragement will let him know he's on the right track. Let's watch as Brayden and his mom demonstrate some of the milestones your baby should reach by 18 months of age.

- Reaches or points to something wanted.
- Understands far more words than he or she can speak.
- Understands simple sentences, questions and requests. For example, "Go get your shoes".
- Points to several body parts when asked.
- Uses at least 20 words consistently.
- Makes at least four different consonant sounds – p, b, m, n, d, g, w, h
- Enjoys looking at books and being read to and can point to pictures using one finger.
- Shakes head for "no".

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These are some of the milestones your baby should be reaching by the age of 18 months, but it's important to remember that every child is unique and will reach milestones at his or her own pace.

However, some children have difficulty developing normal speech and language skills, and may need extra help from a specialist. It's important for these children to get help early to prevent more problems later on, and so that they can reach their fullest potential.

Be sure to speak with your healthcare provider if your child doesn't show interest in others, doesn't try to imitate sounds, gestures or words, snores, or sounds nasal or congested even without having a cold—or if you have any other concerns about your child's development.

Now let's look at some important ways that you as a parent can help your child continue to build his communication skills...

Building blocks: 12 to 18 months

At this age, your baby is growing by leaps and bounds. He's constantly learning new things and discovering the world around him. He's also developing a strong sense of what interests him. Use your child's interests as an opportunity to talk and use words related to those interests – this will make learning fun and natural! And remember to reward his efforts to communicate by responding with enthusiasm and giving him lots of praise. Here are some more tips for how you can help support your child's language development at this age.

Kids love it when you get down to their level to talk and play with them. It helps them to focus and connect with you, and it shows them that you're interested in what they're saying or doing. You can sit on the floor, crouch to your child's level, lie down on your side or your stomach, or prop your child on your knees to bring him to face level. Being at your child's level makes it easier to see what he's trying to tell you when he doesn't have the words to express himself. And it's a great opportunity to use those words with him. Watch how Brayden's mom connects with him, and uses the word "glasses" and "mummy" when he shows her that he wants her to wear them.

Everyday routines like bath time, story time and mealtime provide a great opportunity to build your child's vocabulary through repetition of the words often used during these routines. For example, you may often use the words "cup", "spoon", "apple" or "juice" at lunch time. By hearing these words every day, your child will begin to make the connection between the words and the things or the actions that go with them. Here we can see how Brayden makes the connection between his bottle of juice and the picture of juice in his book.

Whether you're giving your child a bath, getting him dressed or playing with him, talk to him about what you're doing using short sentences. Besides being easier to understand, short sentences also show your child how to use different types of words that make up a sentence, like verbs or action words, and adjectives or words that describe. Your child will need these types of words when he starts to combine words into short sentences himself.

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When you're talking to your child, be sure to pause and give him a chance to answer. That way, you're letting him know it's his turn and that his response is important – whether it's with words or simply a smile, eye gaze, gesture, or grunt. After he has his turn to respond, take another turn yourself and then wait again. This teaches your child that conversations are two-way, with each person taking turns talking and then listening.

Taking words your baby is already familiar with and using them in new ways is a terrific way to help prepare your child for two-word combinations. In this clip, watch how mom combines the words “pass” and “ball”, and “mummy” and “ball”.

Pointing to and naming body parts on yourself and your child will help him learn important words that he can use to express himself when he's hurt or not feeling well. By naming and describing things that your child points to, you're also helping him build an important skill called “joint attention”, which is the ability to look back and forth between an object of interest and the person talking about it.

At this age, your child is becoming more interested in books. He listens more carefully to your reading, and may point at pictures that capture his attention. Let your child lead the way. If he wants to stop and look at a picture instead of turning the page, or if he wants to turn the page before you're finished reading, that's okay. It's also okay to stop reading if he becomes restless and loses interest. The important thing is to keep it fun and relaxed. Over time, your child will be able to sit and listen for a longer time. The best books for this age have colourful images and only a small number of words on the page. Your child will especially love books that are easy to manipulate, like board books, as well as books that are interactive, letting him lift flaps, feel textures or look in a mirror.

You can also turn reading into a conversation with your child by creating a simple book with your own pictures. Organize pictures of familiar and new objects, people and actions under categories such as “toys”, “food”, “bath time” and “our family”... and talk about them with your child while looking at and pointing to the pictures. A personalized picture book will help him learn and remember the words for people, things and situations that are part of his own life.

Conclusion

In this program, we've reviewed some of the milestones your child should reach at about this age, and some simple ways that you can support his or her growing communication skills.

You're encouraged to return to this resource at each step of your child's development. And remember: if at any stage you have concerns about your child's speech and language development, don't hesitate to talk to your healthcare provider. By using the simple tips we've discussed in this program, and by getting help for any communication problems early, you can help pave the way for your child's future success!