

Is My Child's Speech or Language Delayed?

Carolyn A. Weiner, M.A., C.C.C.

Parents are often the first adults to notice a possible delay in their child's speech or language development. Your child's speech may not be clear. Or, your child may use shorter sentences than other children the same age. This observation generally leads to three questions:

Is my child's speech or language delayed?

Speech skills are different from language skills. Language refers to the use of words and sentences to convey ideas. Speech is the production of sounds that make up the words and sentences.

Using developmental milestones, such as those listed below, you can compare your child's development with that of other children the same age. Read the description and ask yourself the questions listed. You can get an idea if your child's communication skills are about the same, higher than, or lower than expected.

Use caution when applying any measure of development to your child. Individual differences or special circumstances need to be accounted for. This can be done by consulting with your school's *speech and language clinician* or by checking with your local speech and hearing clinic.

Milestones of Speech and Language Development

- One-year-old children should be able to understand a variety of words and should be using a few single words.
- By age two, words should be combined into two- and three-word phrases and sentences.
- Between the ages of three and five, children learn to carry on a conversation, ask and answer questions, follow and give directions, and speak alone in the presence of a group. These skills are important to success in kindergarten.
- After age five, sentences become increasingly complex. Children begin using words like "when," "while," and "since" to relate two or more ideas in a single sentence. The language level used by teachers and textbooks assumes that

children have this skill by the age of seven or eight.

- As a rule, children use understandable speech by age four and use all speech sounds correctly by age five to seven.

At what point should I be concerned about my child's development?

Both social and academic success depend on well-developed speech and language skills. Your child may be having difficulty developing these skills if:

1. Your child has experienced ear infections or an unusually long stay (six months or more) in the hospital.
2. The child is not understood by playmates or others outside the immediate family.
3. The child is frustrated when trying to communicate and the situation does not improve over a one- or two-month period.
4. There is a delay of one year or more in developing speech and language skills. For example, here is a sample of abnormal language development (compiled by Beth Witt):

Three-year-old:

- Says only one or two words at a time.
- Cannot answer "what" or "who" questions.
- Speech is not comprehensible except in context.
- Does not seem to hear or understand all that is said; seems to "tune out" what others say.
- Does not start conversations. Speaks only when spoken to.
- Does not understand spoken directions without visual assistance from pointing and other gestures.
- Repeats what others say rather than responding.

Four-year-old:

- Talks in only two- or three-word phrases. Word order is poor.
- Cannot answer simple "what," "where," or "why" questions.

- Sentences or words are jumbled and disordered—hard to understand.
- Does not talk to peers or adults unless prodded, and then talks as little as possible.
- Does not respond to simple two-step directions: "Go to the kitchen. Bring me a spoon."
- Cannot listen to two or three lines of a story and answer simple questions about what was read.

Five-year-old:

- Talks in only three- or four-word sentences about present events.
- Cannot answer questions about "yesterday" or "tomorrow." Cannot answer "how" questions.
- Poor articulation is still a problem. Child's speech is unclear.
- Talks a great deal, but remarks may not be relevant to the situation.
- Has trouble sitting and listening to story of more than four or five sentences without "tuning out."

If any of these problems exist, it is recommended that you have your child's speech and language skills evaluated or tested.

What can I do about my child's speech and language problem?

Check with your local school district to see what evaluation and therapy services are available for your child. Many districts offer programs for preschool children. Some districts even extend services to infants. If your local district does not

have a program for your child, call the Department of Education in your state and ask what services are available on a state-wide basis. If you live in a larger town, you may have the services of a speech and language clinician in a hospital, clinic, or private practice available to you. (For information, call the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association at 301-897-5700.)

After you have located a source of professional assistance, schedule an appointment for an evaluation. Then allow yourself a couple of days to think of, and write down, all the things about your child's communication that concern you. By writing them down, you relieve yourself of the burden of trying to remember them on the day of the appointment.

Vocabulary

Articulation—The production of speech sounds.

Evaluation—Tests used to measure a person's level of development, or to identify a possible disease or disorder.

Speech and language clinician—A person who is qualified to diagnose and treat speech, language, and voice disorders.

Refer to:

- 1.2 The Speech and Language Evaluation
- 1.3 Disorders of Speech and Language
- 1.4 The Speech and Language Glossary
- 2.1 Language Development
- 2.2 Speech Development
- 2.4 Development of the Preschool Child
- 10.2.4 Otitis Media