



Frequently Asked Questions about Childhood Language Development
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Hi. My name is Mary Alt and I am an Associate Professor in the Department of Speech, Language, and Hearing Sciences at the University of Arizona. I'm also a clinically trained certified Speech Language Pathologist and I'm so happy that Talking Matters invited me to talk with you about my area of expertise, something I have a passionate interest in: Child language development.

Because we know that people have many questions about child language development, this video provides an overview of frequently asked questions, and some answers. Sometimes you'll see Frequently Asked Questions written as FAQs.

In this video, I'm going to give you an overview of the Frequently Asked Questions section of the Talking Matters webpage which has been divided into four main areas that people have questions about: *Milestones of development*, *Speech and language delays* and what to do about them, *Strategies that help children develop language and successful communication*, and *bilingualism* - what happens when children are learning two languages. I'll highlight some of the specific questions people have in each of these areas, and give you a broad overview of the answers to some of these questions.

Basically, I'll cover the principles. However, I hope you will go to the resources on the sidebar of this webpage and look at the specifics in the FAQ (frequently asked questions) section. That's where you'll find not only general answers to your questions, but also some very specific answers. And if you have more questions, there is the Talking Matters TalkLine at the University of Arizona that you can call, and talk to a Speech language pathologist who can give you more information. That number is also on the web page.

So let's talk about language development. There are so many questions that parents have about language development. And that's fantastic, because if you're asking questions, that means you want to do the right things for your children.

We're here to provide you with resources to answer some of those questions, both through this talk, and with the other resources on this webpage. First of all, it is really important to realize that whenever we're talking about human growth and development, there's going to be a wide range of what's considered typical or normal, and strategies that may work for one family may not work for another family. So it's important to remember that individual variability must always be considered within the answers we provide.

The questions we are going to talk about are real ones that parents in the Tucson community have asked us about their children's language development. We found that the questions could be grouped in the four categories I mentioned.

Let's begin with the first category: What should I expect for my child's language development? A parent's desire to know what happens next in just about every aspect of development is present throughout a child's life. A lot of people really don't know what to expect in terms of language development. For example, a lot of people don't realize that there are a lot of language or communication behaviors that happen even before a baby is one year old. So some of the questions parents have about language are: What's normal? What's typical? What should I be looking for? Are there differences between boys and girls? How big are those differences? What should I expect? And even: Am I doing something wrong? Let me give you some broad answers to these questions, and you can look in the FAQ section under "milestones" for more details. As I mentioned before, there is a lot of individual variability. So, what one baby does at one year, another baby may do at 10 months, and another typically-developing baby may do at 14 months. All three babies are on target! There are expected milestones for development for children and we can start looking for those milestones right from the get-go. One thing that's important for you to know is that there are developmental milestones or things we expect for babies within the first year. For example, we expect babies to make eye contact with their parents. We expect babies to follow a parent's gaze when they are looking at something. We expect babies to start babbling or making different sounds that aren't words. We expect babies to play. We expect babies to respond to their names. We expect babies to use words when they are about a year old. We expect them to begin using words together - like "Mommy up" or "more juice" - by the time they are two or even earlier. We expect them to use simple sentences like

“Nanna’s coming” by the time they are three. I could go on and on, but the point is we know a lot of things about language development and when we expect to see certain behaviors. It can be fun and exciting to take a look at and see what those patterns are. When you learn what goes into communication, you’ll really appreciate all the little things your children are doing. The main thing you want to look for in your child is good communication. You can help your child by knowing what signs to look for and by actively engaging with them. You can look at our milestones section to learn more.

Are there differences between boys and girls? There are, but they are typically minor. So, even though we expect girls to develop language a bit sooner than boys, we expect ALL children, for example, to say their first words at age 1. There’s not a separate set of norms for boys. So boys might be a little later, but they still should be within that window of what we expect for all children. And individual boys are going to be different than individual girls. I can tell you that in my family, my son was an earlier talker than his sister was at the same age. That goes against what the statistics would say, but that’s where, as a parent, you have to remember that you are raising your unique child, not a statistic.

Now, I really want to turn to this last question: am I doing something wrong? No! If you are here learning about language development, you aren’t doing anything wrong. Children are incredibly resilient, and as long as you are making an effort to communicate with your child, you aren’t doing anything wrong. Even when a child has a language problem, it is important to know that adults can not cause children to have language delays or impairment, except in cases of serious maltreatment. That said, there are a lot of things you can be doing to facilitate your child’s language growth, and we’ll talk about that in just a little while, but the fact that you are showing interest in your child’s language development is a fantastic place to start!

There are a couple of reasons people want to know what is typical and what is not. One is natural curiosity. Another one is to make sure their child is on track. One thing we know is that the earlier we find out if a child has a delay or a disorder and the earlier we provide them with therapy, the better their outcomes are. So that brings us to our second topic: How will I know if there is a delay? And what will I do if there is one? So first, if you are worried about your child's language development, it's better to **do** something about it instead of just worrying. Find out. Talk to your child's pediatrician and ask for a referral to a speech language pathologist. Get your child evaluated. If your pediatrician says don't worry, they'll grow out of it, push hard and ask for a referral anyway. Speech language pathologists have years of training specifically on language. Pediatricians don't. While your child may grow out of it, know that early intervention only works if it happens **early**. And if you just wait and see, based on a hunch, you are going to miss that window of opportunity. On the other hand, if you get an evaluation, you may be soothed by knowing that your child is on target, or you might take part in watchful waiting, where you know specifically what to look for next and probably will get a few techniques to help your child. Or if your child IS diagnosed with a problem, you are in a perfect position to start doing something about it to help your child become the best communicator he or she can be.

When should you be worried? You should be worried if you feel your child's communication skills aren't what they should be. If you feel like your child is getting really frustrated or you are getting really frustrated and you can't understand your child. Quite often a parent's feelings or worries about their child's language are well-founded. You might also be worried if you have family members or close friends telling you they have a really difficult time understanding your child. And, if you are familiar with language milestones, you can be checking to see if your child is meeting those. For example, if your baby is less than one year old and doesn't babble, doesn't gesture, and doesn't make eye contact, then that is something to talk to a specialist about. If you have a one-year old who isn't using words- that deserves attention. If you have a two-year old who doesn't have at least fifty words and isn't combining words, that's a red flag. If your three-year old can't follow directions and most people can't understand him, that's a red flag. There are other red flags, but these are some of the big ones. You can find out more about red flags on our web page.

In terms of preventing language problems, remember that you can't cause a language problem, thus you are unlikely to be able to prevent a language problem. Although we don't know exactly

what causes language impairments, we do know they are brain-based disorders, some of which have a genetic component, meaning that they may be passed down through family members. We know you can minimize the risk of having a baby with language impairment, or any other developmental problem, by having good prenatal care. However, there is no guarantee that even by taking the best possible care before a baby is born, that you can prevent a language problem. That said, a true language problem can be minimized by good therapy and a language rich environment.

So, how do you get your child language therapy? First, he or she should have an evaluation. The very first step is to go the pediatrician to make sure that your child can see and hear and that there are no other medical issues going on. Then the pediatrician will make a referral to a certified speech language pathologist. That person will do an evaluation of your child. It doesn't hurt at all. This isn't a physical examination – it is an examination of your child's communication skills, although they may examine your child's mouth. They'll ask your child to talk, play games, they'll interview you and observe you interacting with your child, and based on their training and experience, they'll be able to tell you whether or not your child's behaviors are on target, a little bit behind, or something that really needs intervention. If your child does need intervention, they'll start working with a speech language pathologist. They may work directly with your child or they may train you as a family member; it really depends. There are a lot of different models. We do know that speech language therapy DOES WORK and can help your child get to a place where they no longer need the therapy and can function without it. Bottom line: If you are worried, see a speech language pathologist.

Now let's talk about how you can encourage and improve your child's communication skills. Let me start by saying there are some limits to what you can do. Just as you can't cause a child's language impairment, you also can't make a child a language superstar. That said, there is an enormous amount that parents and caregivers and communication partners can do to improve a child's language and communication skills, and incidentally, improve their chances of academic success. The biggest and best thing you can do is really talk **WITH** your child. Don't just talk **to** your child; really talk **with** her. Not just "put your shoes on," "eat your food," "do this, do that," not the everyday management we do, but really looking at your child and being attentive and being engaged and having a real conversation. That is an enormous gift that will also really help you gauge what your child's communication skills are like. The more you talk to your child, even

before your child can talk (it is never too early!), the better your child's language skills will be. The more kinds of words a child hears, the better his or her vocabulary will be. The more a child is read to using a dialogue – this is called dialogic reading- the more beneficial reading will be to your child's language development. With dialogic reading, reading isn't just "sit down be quiet and listen to this" but instead is much more interactive. This is a variation on what we just talked about how to talk **with** your child. You also want to read **with** your child, not just **to** her. To do that, you sit down and point things out to your child, ask and answer questions, and talk about the book beyond the words on the page. That type of reading is an enormous benefit to your child's language. Narrating your everyday life is another great way to help your child's language development. Instead of just popping your baby into the bath and cleaning her up, try singing songs, or talking to her: "Now we're putting the shampoo in. It's in your hair. Wow, your hair has grown! It sure is curly." That sort of narration can do wonders for a baby. Playing games with a baby and narrating those games while you are playing is yet another fun and beneficial way to build language and make communication feel fun and satisfying for your child. All of these things are an enormous benefit to your child's language skills. Again, it won't change a child from being language impaired to unimpaired, but it could make the difference between a child being a functional communicator or not. And it definitely will put them in a better place to be successful in school. The more words they know, the more they can understand. As a speech language pathologist, it is always exciting to talk about ways you can enhance and enrich your child's development. If you want to learn more, take a look at the video on this webpage called "Facilitating language development."

The next topic we're going to talk about is Bilingualism. This topic is so big, the Talking Matters web page also has an entire module about it. We're going to cover some main points here too. Bilingualism is common in most of the world. That means it isn't something that is beyond the capabilities of most human beings, especially children. But bilingualism is most effective when it is real and functional. So in other words, if you want your child to speak French, and just give her some videos and a class once a week, and she never speaks French outside of those sessions, the odds that she'll really learn French are low. One thing we know is that the best way for a child to become bilingual is to have good quality input in whatever languages he or she is trying to learn, and an opportunity to **use** those languages. Being bilingual does **not** slow down a child's language development. Just as there is no difference between boys and girls in terms of when we expect them to learn first words, there are no different norms worldwide for when we expect bilingual children to reach language milestones. Bilingualism is unique - there

are no two families or children who are bilingual in exactly the same way. If you want a child to be bilingual, they need to be exposed to BOTH languages. If you have a child who hears Spanish at home, and then is learning English at school, that child needs to keep hearing Spanish to develop and maintain her Spanish. That will not hurt her English, as long as she continues to hear English as well. Children will not be confused by hearing two languages. There is evidence that even babies can separate out information from two languages, and know what is coming from one language, and what is coming from another. There are definitely benefits to being bilingual. There are social benefits, being able to talk to twice as many people, being able to communicate with family members, having more job opportunities. However, research is showing there are also benefits to thinking skills from being bilingual. In terms of exactly how children become bilingual, we still have a lot to learn. However, the evidence is clear that being bilingual is not something that should be at all harmful for children, as long as a child is getting good input in **both** languages. There is so much to cover within this topic, so if the FAQ section doesn't answer all your questions, please see the special section on bilingualism on this web page.

This time has gone by so quickly! I hope that you feel you have some basic ideas about language development and are looking forward to finding out more. It really is a magical process. Please remember that if you ever have more questions about language development, or your child's language development in particular, feel free to use the Talking Matters TalkLine. Thanks!

