



## **LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT: WHAT'S NORMAL?**

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As a speech-language pathologist, I am frequently asked by parents whether their child's language is developing adequately. Often these parents have noticed children among their child's agetates who use more words or express themselves in longer sentences.

Certainly we should all use caution when comparing children. Individual differences, such as prematurity at birth or a chronic illness, need to be taken into consideration. It is also true that girls speak earlier than boys and are more verbal in the early years.

Generally, though, a speech-language pathologist uses some guidelines when evaluating the appropriateness of a preschool child's language development. A one-year-old should understand many more words than he can say. By eighteen months the baby has anywhere from three to twenty words in his vocabulary. He is capable of carrying out a simple command, such as "Get your shoes." He can also identify, by pointing, many of the objects that he interacts with in his daily routine, such as bed, teddy bear or cup.

By their second birthday children have a vocabulary of approximately fifty words. These words will probably include the names of family and friends, familiar objects, action words like "eat", "drink", and "ride", adjectives like "dirty" and "mine", and social words like "please" and "thank you". Two-year-olds also begin to put two words together to make simple sentences, such as "more cookie" or "no night-night." By the time the child is three, these phrases have expanded to three- and four-word sentences, such as "Cookie all gone now."

As the baby grows, comprehension of language also expands, from about 300 words at 24 months to 900 words at 36 months. The toddler now understands simple questions and can respond appropriately to "What do we drink from?" or "Where do we sleep?" He can also follow simple directions such as "Put the blocks in the box." The concept of numer is also emerging and the toddler may ask for two cookies or hold up two fingers when asked his age.

Between the ages of two and three we also begin to notice that the child has begun to make sense out of our rules of grammar. In his speech we see emerging the "s" marker at the end of words indicating plurals (cats); the "ed" marker indicating past tense (the cat jumped); and the articles "a" and "the". You may also hear some contractions in his speech, such as "don't" and "can't."

By his third birthday the young child has about a 500 word vocabulary. He can ask simple questions, such as "Why did grandma go?" or "Is he eating?" He uses the possessive (Daddy's

shoes), the pronouns "he", "she" and "it" are emerging, as well as the negative, "not". The future tense also begins to appear (Daddy will go).

Between the ages of three and five, children learn to carry on a conversation, ask and answer more complex questions, give and follow directions, and use language to control social situations. Sentences become increasingly complex, relating two or more ideas in a single sentence (After we eat lunch, we can go to the park).

If you feel that your child's speech is significantly behind what is described here, contact a speech-language pathologist for a complete evaluation. Remember, the earlier you identify a language problem, the more favorable the outcome. So don't delay!