

Watching for signs of language delay in your child

October 21 2014, by Dr. Jason Scofield

One of the wonderful and thrilling parts of being a parent comes in witnessing a child's firsts: their first smile, their first laugh, their first step, their first word. These firsts can be delightful, exciting and memorable.

But for some parents, these firsts can also be a source of worry – especially when they are delayed. Knowing when to expect [developmental milestones](#) or how to recognize developmental milestones matters since the late onset of these firsts can be an early sign of other, sometimes more pervasive problems.

Perhaps no set of milestones is more important to know than those related to early [language development](#). The University of Alabama's Dr. Jason Scofield shares a few of those milestones.

- Babies usually begin cooing within the first few months of life (even deaf babies coo), and cooing should be followed by babbling. Babbling involves producing strings of speech sounds, like vowels or consonants, that convey no meaning and have no semantic value. Interestingly, deaf babies of parents who use America Sign Language do what's sometimes called "fingerbabbling" by making movements with their fingers. Many babies are cooing or babbling by 6 months of age.
- During the second half of the first year (ages 6 to 12 months) infants usually show signs of producing and comprehending the language around them. For example, a 9-month-old infant will

respond to her own name and may recognize the names of some familiar objects (e.g., "Where's the ball?"). Babies in this age range also produce social and communicative gestures like gazing or pointing as a way of directing another person's attention toward something in the world. Perhaps the most critical milestone to watch for is that infants are engaging with their social partners. They make and hold eye contact, laugh and cuddle, and even look in the direction of their partner's point or gaze. It's the reciprocal nature of these early social or communicative interactions that can tell a deeper story about the child's developmental trajectory.

- Near the first birthday (10 to 18 months) infants and toddlers are usually producing their first [words](#). These early words may not be perfectly articulated ("ba" might stand for ball) or perfectly accurate (have you ever heard an infant refer to dad as "mom" ... I have), but they are used consistently and are meant to refer to something. For English-speaking infants, many of their first words are nouns, like ball or dog, but that doesn't have to be the case. From these first words, children gradually build toward a vocabulary of about 50 words.
- Around the second birthday (18 to 24 months) toddlers may show a vocabulary "spurt" or "explosion" where their lexicon grows very quickly. Toddlers can expand their vocabularies from 50 words to 1,000 words in just a year. Along the way, they will begin combining words to convey larger, more complicated meanings.

Most of the important early language milestones like these are related to language production and comprehension. If a child doesn't meet these milestones in the typical time frame, especially if the child misses multiple milestones or shows delays in other areas of development, parents should take note and consider consulting their pediatrician or maybe a speech and language pathologist for a more formal assessment.

However, it is also important to understand there can be a tremendous amount of variability from one child to the next as to when these milestones are met, even among children with typical development.

Provided by University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa

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