

# Language Development Milestones

## National Institute for Child Health and Human Development (NICHD)

### Birth to 5 months

- Reacts to loud sounds.
- Turns head toward a sound source.
- Watches your face when you speak.
- Vocalizes pleasure and displeasure sounds (laughs, giggles, cries, or fusses)
- Makes noise when talked to.

### 6-11 months

- Understands "no-no".
- Babbles (says "ba-ba-ba" or "ma-ma-ma").
- Tries to communicate by actions or gestures.
- Tries to repeat your sounds.



### 12-17 months

- Attends to a book or toy for about two minutes.
- Follows simple directions accompanied by gestures.
- Answers simple questions nonverbally.
- Points to objects, pictures, and family members.
- Says two to three words to label a person or object (pronunciation may not be clear).
- Tries to imitate simple words.

### 18-23 months

- Enjoys being read to.
- Follows simple commands without gestures.
- Points to simple body parts such as "nose."
- Understands simple verbs such as "eat," "sleep."
- Correctly pronounces most vowels and *n*, *m*, *p*, *h*, especially in the beginning of syllables and short words. Also begins to use other speech sounds.
- Says 8 to 10 words (pronunciation may still be unclear).
- Asks for common foods by name.
- Makes animal sounds such as "moo."
- Starting to combine words such as "more milk."
- Begins to use pronouns such as "mine."

### 2-3 years

- Knows about 50 words at 24 months.
- Knows some spatial concepts such as "in," "on."
- Knows pronouns such as "you," "me," "her."
- Knows descriptive words such as "big," "happy."
- Says around 40 words at 24 months.
- Speech is becoming more accurate but may still leave off ending sounds.
- Strangers may not be able to understand much of what is said.
- Answers simple questions.
- Begins to use more pronouns such as "you," "I."
- Speaks in two to three word phrases.
- Uses question inflection to ask for something (e.g., "My ball?").
- Begins to use plurals such as "shoes" or "socks" and regular past tense verbs such as "jumped."



### 3-4 years

- Groups objects such as foods, clothes, etc.
- Identifies colors.
- Repeats sentences.
- Uses verbs that end in "ing" ("walking," "talking").
- Strangers are able to understand much of what is said.
- Uses most speech sounds but may distort some of the more difficult sounds such as *l, r, s, sh, ch, y, v, z, th*. These sounds may not be fully mastered until age 7 or 8.
- Uses consonants in the beginning, middle, and ends of words. Some of the more difficult consonants may be distorted, but attempts to say them.
- Able to describe the use of objects such as "fork," "car," etc.
- Has fun with language. Enjoys poems and recognizes language absurdities such as, "Is that an elephant on your head?"
- Expresses ideas and feelings rather than just talking about the world around him or her.
- Answers simple questions such as "What do you do when you are hungry?"

### 4-5 years

- Understands spatial concepts such as "behind," "next to."
- Understands complex questions.
- Speech is understandable but makes mistakes pronouncing long, difficult, or complex words such as "hippopotamus."
- Says about 200 - 300 different words.
- Uses some irregular past tense verbs such as "ran," "fell."
- Describes how to do things such as painting a picture.
- Defines words.
- Lists items that belong in a category such as animals, vehicles, etc.
- Answers "why" questions.

### 5 years

- Understands more than 2,000 words.
- Understands time sequences (what happened first, second, third, etc).
- Carries out a series of three directions.
- Understands rhyming.
- Engages in conversation.
- Sentences can be 8 or more words in length.
- Uses compound and complex sentences.
- Describes objects.
- Uses imagination to create stories.



### What about beyond 5 years?

- Language use becomes more flexible and generative.
- Language learning shifts to written language and acquisition of formal rules.
- Children learn to read and write.
- Vocabulary expands and becomes more sophisticated.
- More incidental learning occurs through exposure to written language, especially through wide reading.
- Awareness of situational language use increases.