

Late Talker or Language Delay?

Children typically start using first words around their first birthday...about the same time they take their first steps. But what if this doesn't happen? How do you know when to be worried, and when to seek help? Parents often get mixed messages when they start to ask these questions. Friends, family members, even doctors often advise parents to "wait and see." Everyone knows someone who didn't talk until age 3, and then suddenly started speaking in full sentences.

It's true that many children seem to "catch up" on their own...but many children don't. And in the meantime, you have a child who can't communicate with you...and may be very frustrated as a result. Not to mention the constant worry, *What if there really is a problem?* So here's some information that may help you decide what to do.

Typical language milestones:

In the first few years of life, children typically follow these stages:

- ♦ **By 15 months:** using first words.
- ♦ **Between 15 & 24 months:** "Vocabulary burst," learning 3-5 new words per week.
- ♦ **By 18 months:** Start to combine words into short phrases (eg. "more cookie, Mommy go bye") by 18 months.
- ♦ **By 24 months:** Expressive vocabulary of 200-250 words.
- ♦ **By 36 months:** Using short simple sentences (eg. "Me wanna do it, " "Daddy going in the car.")

When should I seek help?

If your child is 18 months or older, with fewer than 20 words and/or no word combinations, it's best to get the opinion of a Speech/Language Pathologist. If any of the following risk factors are also present, the chance of your child having an ongoing language delay increases.

- ♦ Quiet as an infant, limited babbling & sound play;
- ♦ Doesn't try to imitate new words;
- ♦ Vocabulary is mostly nouns (names of people and things), with very few verbs (action words);
- ♦ Uses no or very few gestures to communicate (eg. point, wave "byebye," reach up to be picked up);
- ♦ Uses very few different consonant sounds;
- ♦ Difficulty initiating and participating in play with other children;
- ♦ Frequent middle ear infections;
- ♦ Anyone in your immediate family has had a communication delay or learning difficulties.

What is the big deal?

- ♦ Children with early language delays are likely to have later difficulties one or more of the following: sentence and grammatical development; speech sound production; learning to read and write; and social interaction with other children.

- ♦ If there is a language-learning difficulty, the earlier a child receives therapy, the better they progress. Research shows strongly that children with language difficulties who attended speech/language therapy as preschoolers do much better in school than language-delayed children who did not receive any early therapy.
- ♦ Not to mention the frustration and anxiety that you and your child may be dealing with every day!

What can I do?

- **Trust yourself.** You know your child best. If you're really concerned, or even just wondering, get a professional opinion from a Speech/Language Pathologist. You don't need a doctor to refer you; just call NONA at 549-1281, or email the Speech/Language Pathology program using the Contact link on our web page. The North Okanagan Health Unit also offers Speech/Language Pathology services to preschool-aged children. Their number is 549-5700. Both services are publicly funded, so there is no charge for them.
- **Get help ASAP.** The sooner a child gets help learning to talk, the better the progress, and the better the chance of preventing a long-term problem. And, if you find that your child doesn't need the extra help, the sooner you know that, the sooner you can stop worrying.
- **Don't panic!** Children who have just an expressive language delay (no difficulties with understanding of language, and no delays in any other area of development) usually respond very well to speech therapy.
- **Get your child's hearing checked.** This is especially important if your child has had frequent colds or ear infections. Fluid buildup in the middle ears can interfere with speech and language development. And it's always best to have a hearing impairment ruled out. The Health Unit also offers hearing testing.
- **Make learning easier for your child by:**
 - Reflecting your child's messages and adding one more word.
 - Choosing 5-10 words to highlight during daily routines and play activities, and repeating them frequently.
 - Using "fun" words and sounds like "uh-oh", "Shhhhhhh", "pop-pop-pop!"
 - Pairing words with gestures to help your child attend to and learn the word. Encourage your child to use gestures; these will eventually help to cue the words.
 - Be patient with your child and with yourself. Don't pressure your child to talk – this only creates more frustration. Accept their communication and gently model the words for them.