

## SPEECH AND LANGUAGE

Children are born ready to learn a language, but they need to learn the language or languages that their family and environment use. Learning a language takes time, and children vary in how quickly they master milestones in language and speech development. Typically developing children may have trouble with some sounds, words, and sentences while they are learning. However, most children can use language easily around 5 years of age.



### Helping children learn language

Parents and caregivers are the most important teachers during a child's early years. Children learn language by listening to others speak and by practicing. Even young babies notice when others repeat and respond to the noises and sounds they make. Children's language and brain skills get stronger if they hear many different words. Parents can help their child learn in many different ways, such as

- Responding to the first sounds, gurgles, and gestures a baby makes.
- Repeating what the child says and adding to it.
- Talking about the things that a child sees.
- Asking questions and listening to the answers.
- Looking at or reading books.
- Telling stories.
- Singing songs and sharing rhymes.

This can happen both during playtime and during daily routines.

## What to do if there are concerns

Some children struggle with understanding and speaking and they need help. They may not master the language milestones at the same time as other children, and it may be a sign of a language or speech delay or disorder.

Language development has different parts, and children might have problems with one or more of the following:

- Understanding what others say (receptive language). This could be due to
  - Not hearing the words (hearing loss).
  - Not understanding the meaning of the words.
- Communicating thoughts using language (expressive language). This could be due to
  - Not knowing the words to use.
  - Not knowing how to put words together.
  - Knowing the words to use but not being able to express them.

Language and speech disorders can exist together or by themselves. Examples of problems with language and speech development include the following:

- Speech disorders
  - Difficulty with forming specific words or sounds correctly.
  - Difficulty with making words or sentences flow smoothly, like stuttering or stammering.
- Language delay – the ability to understand and speak develops more slowly than is typical
- Language disorders
  - Aphasia (difficulty understanding or speaking parts of language due to a brain injury or how the brain works).
  - Auditory processing disorder (difficulty understanding the meaning of the sounds that the ear sends to the brain).

Language or speech disorders can occur with other learning disorders that affect reading and writing. Children with language disorders may feel frustrated that they cannot understand others or make themselves understood, and they may act out, act helpless, or withdraw. Language or speech disorders can also be present with emotional or behavioural disorders, such as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or anxiety. Children with developmental disabilities including autism spectrum disorder may also have difficulties with speech and language. The combination of challenges can make it particularly hard for a child to succeed in school. Properly diagnosing a child's disorder is crucial so that each child can get the right kind of help

## Detecting problems with language or speech



If a child has a problem with language or speech development, talk to a healthcare provider about an evaluation. An important first step is to find out if the child may have a hearing loss. Hearing loss may be difficult to notice particularly if a child has hearing loss only in one ear or has partial hearing loss, which means they can hear some sounds but not others.

A language development specialist like a speech therapist will conduct a careful assessment to determine what type of problem with language or speech the child may have.

Overall, learning more than one language does not cause language disorders, but children may not follow exactly the same developmental milestones as those who learn only one language. Developing the ability to understand and speak in two languages depends on how much practice the child has using both languages, and the kind of practice. If a child who is learning more than one language has difficulty with language development, careful assessment by a specialist who understands development of skills in more than one language may be needed.

## Treatment for language or speech disorders and delays

Children with language problems often need extra help and special instruction. Speech therapists can work directly with children and their parents, caregivers, and teachers.