



Unlocking language for toddlers

Talking the talk and playing the game are the best ways to help your toddler launch confidently into the world of communication, discovers **Susannah Hardy**

Hearing your child utter her first few words is definitely up there as one of life's great thrills. Next to taking her first steps, those initial efforts of verbal communication are truly momentous. However, as a parent, how do you know that your child's speech and language are developing as they should and what can you do to assist? While learning to speak is a natural process, it's also important to be actively involved and know when and where to get help if needed.

What's "normal"?

While there are plenty of helpful checklists in books and on websites to indicate what your child should be doing at what age, Gabi Salamon, a Sydney speech pathologist and mother of 21-month-old twin boys, emphasises that there's a great deal of variation. "I'd look at two or three months behind and two or three months ahead – most kids are somewhere within that range," says Gabi. "There's a huge range of what is normal and children do different things at their own pace. It could be genetic, it could be environmental, it could be their personality."

Bronwyn Carrigg, a speech pathologist from Sydney Children's

Hospital, believes that although "checklists" of developmental milestones are useful, they are not the only way to determine what is going on. "I think parents often have a very strong gut instinct that something might not be right with their child's language development," she says. "This can be more telling than those tick-boxes."

Bronwyn has found that parents sometimes compare their child to a sibling or friend, which is not always beneficial. "Comparing your child to one other child isn't necessarily a reliable indicator, but comparing your child to a whole range of other children at a similar age does give you a bit of information about what they are doing typically at that age," she explains.

First words can come anywhere from 9 months through to 18 months. "Ideally, it would be good to have some single words at 12 months but not all children do," says Bronwyn. "At this age, all the other sorts of skills such as listening, understanding and play are really important."

Some typical referrals to speech pathologists include children at 12 months who show little interest in sounds and voices, and do not babble using a variety of sounds; children at

18 months who have no words or very few; and those at 2 years who have vocabularies of less than 50 words and are not combining words. According to Gabi Salamon, by the time they are 3 years old, children should be 80 per cent intelligible to unfamiliar people.

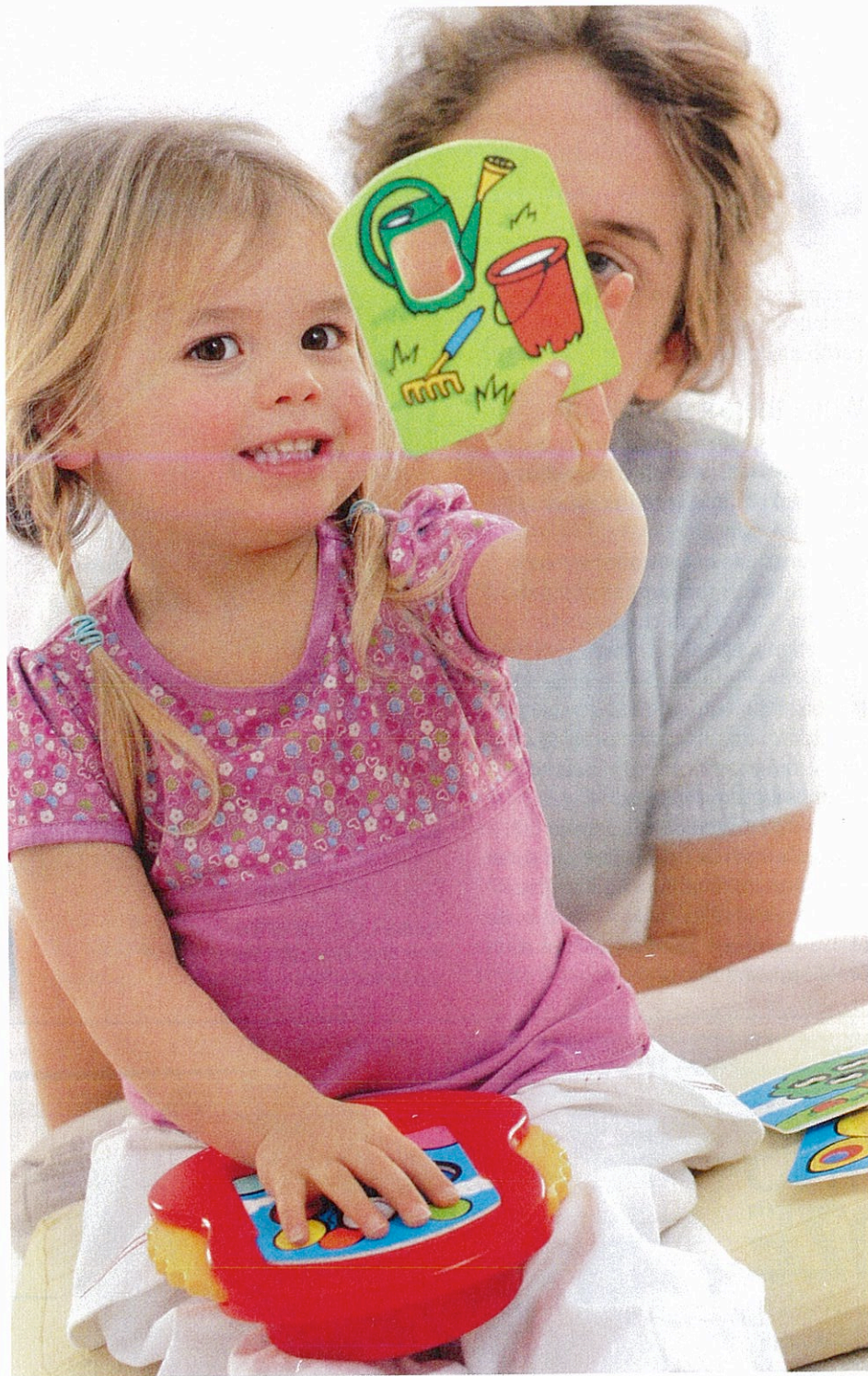
How can I help?

Bronwyn Carrigg believes a parent's input is essential: "Parents have a really important role in exposing their child to language, showing them what communication and relating are all about, and providing opportunities for them to learn." Much of this can be achieved by including simple, yet effective, activities in the everyday.

What's really important?

According to the experts, the most important factors of speech development are:

- Brain function and genetic factors
- Adequate hearing
- A good environment, including toys, books, play and interaction
- Exposure to good-quality talking from parents or carers
- Social skills.



“Children don't need the latest whiz-bang toys, they prefer a simple one and someone to play with”

An extremely important activity is simply playing with your child and having fun. “This sounds basic, but playing and interacting is how children learn communication best,” says Bronwyn. “They don't learn effectively via flash cards or continual questions. They learn most easily when engaged in something and with someone. Being engaged in a DVD isn't the same.”

Toys are useful but don't need to be expensive or complicated. “Children don't need the latest whiz-bang toys, they prefer a simple one and someone to play with,” reveals Bronwyn.

Gabi Salamon also emphasises the importance of playing with your child and suggests games that involve sounds and actions, as these are easier for your child to copy. Gabi recommends encouraging eye contact and playing games that include taking turns – both important skills for communication.

It's vital not only to create a good home environment with plenty of play and interaction, but also to expose your child to a variety of situations. “Children learn from all people in their environment,” says speech pathologist Sarah Starr. “For social

skills and communication development they benefit from spending time with other children and adults, so outings to relatives' homes or to playgroup or the park can allow for modelling and opportunities for interaction in a natural environment.”

Talking to your child is another essential activity. “Talk about what your child is looking at and what they are interested in,” says Bronwyn Carrigg. “With babies, this means looking to see what they are looking at and talking about that, rather than trying to distract your child over to what you think they should be looking at.” When talking to younger children, Bronwyn recommends speaking slower and louder than normal, and with plenty of expression. Always try to pause as well. “Pauses allow children a chance to show us what they can do and what they are interested in,” says Bronwyn.

Gabi Salamon finds some parents use complicated sentences when speaking to their child. “You don't have to give lengthy explanations,” she says. “Children can't copy long sentences so keep the sentences short.” And remember that talking is natural and modelling language can be done anytime, anywhere. “It can be in the pram, at the shops, in the bath, at mealtimes, and so on” says Gabi.

It can be hard to find quality time to dedicate to language stimulation, but many everyday activities are already beneficial. Sarah Starr suggests being attentive to your child while she is speaking to you: “This means turning your mobile off and turning the TV off so you can be completely engaged and uninterrupted.” In addition, Sarah recommends spending 10 to 15 minutes a day reading books together or talking through your child's routine with them.

How to correct your child

While it's important to encourage your child, knowing how to correct her mistakes in a positive way is also essential. “Try not to correct her all ▶

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from previous page

the time as it's not easy for her to make it right," says Gabi Salamon. "If, for example, a child says 'A tup of tea,' you can say, 'Oh yes, a cup of tea,' and then move on."

Bronwyn Carrigg says parents should also resist the temptation to insist their child repeat the word back to them. "Generally, children learn by hearing you say things the correct way. There is no evidence that nagging is an effective language strategy," she explains.

If your child is really struggling to learn language from regular modelling

and parent input, Bronwyn believes it's a good idea to talk to a speech pathologist about it.

When there's a problem

These days, when a child displays difficulties with speech and language, the usual practice is to intervene as soon as possible.

"There's lots of evidence that early intervention is the most efficient and effective way to help children who have a language delay," says Bronwyn. "Children with diagnosed speech and language difficulties are at greater risk for literacy and academic problems, so intervening early can help prevent or minimise later problems."

Early treatment can also avoid other problems such as frustration and some behavioural difficulties. "It also gives parents some relief to know what to do with a child who has a communication problem," says Bronwyn.



Toddlers who talk to themselves or their toys during play are on the right track in terms of speech.

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“Children learn by hearing you say things the correct way. Nagging is not an effective language strategy”

Jane is one mum who suspected her son Jesse had a speech problem when he was around 2 years old. Jesse was later diagnosed with verbal dyspraxia, which involves difficulty forming sounds with the muscles in the mouth, and started therapy when he was 3. “Unfortunately, we’ve had to put the dyspraxia on hold because I noticed at around the age of 4 he started to stutter,” explains Jane. “We had to concentrate on that, because it requires a different type of therapy.”

Jane says that Jesse is improving remarkably well and he very much enjoys the sessions with his speech pathologist. “He absolutely loves it. It’s like playing rather than serious learning,” says Jane. “He just thinks

that every child goes to speech!”

Jesse’s treatment requires that Jane does regular activities with him, as well as monitor his stutter on a daily basis. “It is a lot of work but it’s worth it in the end,” says Jane.

Communication is key

Learning to speak is an important achievement and all parents want their child to progress as smoothly as possible. You can help them along by taking a positive and encouraging role in this process and talking, playing and spending quality time with them. Not only will your child have more opportunity to learn all the necessary skills, but she will also realise just how much fun communicating can be. **PP**

Getting help

- Speech pathologist Bronwyn Carrigg says your early childhood centre nurse or GP will know where local services are and can have a preliminary look at your child’s communication and other skills. “You can also call the speech pathology clinic at your nearest hospital or your local community health centre.”
- Speech Pathology Australia, the official body representing speech pathologists, has an extremely helpful website at www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au. It offers fact sheets with information on speech and language development in children, as well as helpful details on what speech pathologists do and where to find one.



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