

# Speech & language development (from birth to 12 months)

Information for families

Great Ormond Street Hospital  
for Children NHS Foundation Trust

The aim of this leaflet is to provide parents and carers with information and advice to help their child's speech and language to develop. The leaflet explains the normal stages of early speech and language development between birth and 12 months. It aims to help you understand the stage at which your child is functioning and the activities you can do to stimulate and encourage further development. We recommend you speak to your child's speech and language therapist if you have any questions or concerns regarding any of the information enclosed.



## The First Year

There are a number of stages children pass through as they develop their speech and language skills in the first year. The ages given are meant only as a rough guide.

### Stage 1 (0-6 months)

#### Understanding

Your baby starts to understand speech even before he or she begins to speak. From a very early age, he or she will be interested in looking at your face and listening to your voice. At about two to four months, your baby will begin to respond to the different tones that you may use. For example, he or she may cry if you raise your voice or may laugh or gurgle excitedly if you make a word or sound that he or she finds funny.

#### Talking

**Early sounds and noises:** From birth, your baby will make a range of noises which will mean something to you – for example, that he or she is hungry or in pain. These noises include crying, coughing and sounds made while breathing. During feeding, your baby will also make sucking, burping and quiet low-pitched contented sounds. Crying and making noises are important as this is how your baby learns to control the air that comes from his or her lungs and use his or her vocal cords. It lays the foundation for speaking.

**Cooing:** To start with, your baby will still use crying as his or her main means of communicating with you but will then start to extend his range of sounds. This is when your baby starts to make ‘cooing’ noises which develop alongside crying. There is a great variation in the types of sounds made.

As time moves on, your baby will use crying less often to communicate and you will also notice a reduction in the

first early noises he or she made. Your baby will start to make sounds more like 'ooh' and 'aah' and may even play at making sounds with his or her lips. Your baby will also start to smile at you and wait for you to respond and he or she will probably smile back at you. He or she may even imitate your facial expressions – for example, copying you when you stick out your tongue.

The cooing stage is important as this is the time when your baby starts to develop control of the muscles needed for talking.

**Vocal play:** Later on during this stage, your baby will start to coo less and begin to experiment with repeating a wider range of sounds. Your baby will also make 'bubbly' sounds in which his or her tongue makes contact with the lips, and 'raspberry' sounds, in which his or her lips are placed together and vibrate. He or she will start to imitate sounds and intonation (the up and down tunes in speech) and will begin to recognise and respond to his name being called.

## Stage 2 (6-12 months)

### Understanding

By six to nine months, your baby will start to recognise the use of certain phrases in context. For example, when you say 'bye-bye', your baby might wave. Around this time, your baby will also start to turn to familiar voices across a room and will probably begin to respond to his or her own name.

Towards the end of the first year, your baby will have built up a small vocabulary of words that he or she understands. It is important to remember that this often occurs even before your baby says his first word.

### Talking

**Babbling:** Your baby will combine sounds into longer sequences. He or she may combine vowels like 'ah' with consonant-type or hard sounds like 'd'. He or she may make single sounds initially or repeat some sounds such as 'dada, gaga'. The sounds may be made at the front of the mouth using the lips ('mama, baba') or they may be produced at the back of the mouth where the tongue touches the throat ('kaka, gaga').

At this stage, often your baby will enjoy repeating certain sounds over and over again. This is the beginnings of what is commonly called "babbling", in which the sounds and intonation of your baby's voice can be very tuneful and start to resemble speech.

Your baby may be more vocal when playing with an adult or another child, but you will also notice that he or she may make lots of sounds whilst playing alone, looking around at the world or trying to get your attention. At this stage, your baby will start to copy body movements – for example, clapping hands and copying speech sounds.

## The First Year: What you can do

### Getting ready to play

You can play sound games at any time. It is generally best to try to cut down on background noise so that your baby can hear your voice. Also try to sit facing your baby so that he or she can clearly see your face and mouth.

### Develop your baby's listening skills

It is important for your baby to become "tuned into" the speech sounds and everyday sounds that he or she may hear. As your baby develops, he or she should not only turn but also search for the sound he or she hears. You could use soundmakers – for example, bells or hand claps. When you know that your baby can hear sounds, start by making a sound in front of your baby so that he or she can see you. Then make the sound towards the left or the right of your baby. This will help him or her to develop the listening skills which are critical for speech development.

Expose your baby to sounds in the environment – for example, the door bell or the telephone ringing – and when your baby responds say to him or her, for example, 'that's the doorbell!'

### Talk to your baby

Even though your baby does not understand what you are saying, he or she will feel safe when he or she hears your calm and reassuring voice. Vary the volume and pitch of your voice too as babies respond to high and soft voices. You don't even need to use real words: have some fun with sounds! Your baby may not copy these sounds straight away but will enjoy watching your mouth and face and hearing the sounds you make. Let your baby see and feel your mouth moving either with his or her hands or on his or her skin. For example, blow raspberries and let your baby touch your lips to feel the vibration.

### Copy what your baby says

If your baby makes a certain sound or noise, copy the sound/noise and wait for your baby to make another. In this way, you are having a 'baby conversation' and teaching the concept of turn-taking. Always make sure that you are looking at your baby and try not to interrupt. Make sure you use smiling and facial expressions during your 'baby conversations'.

## **Respond to your baby's cries**

You can respond to your baby's cries by touching and holding him or her or by singing and talking to him or her.

## **Teach your baby new words**

When you are with your baby, name familiar objects/toys that your baby looks at or plays with.

If your baby makes sounds while he or she is playing with a toy or is looking at an object, imitate those sounds and interpret them by providing the name of the toy/object.

During everyday activities – for example, feeding, bathing, nappy changes – and during routines when your baby is with you, talk about what you or your baby are doing. Expose your baby to different and new situations – for example, shopping trips, bus trips or even washing the dishes. These are great situations to teach new vocabulary.

## **Play**

Give your baby things to feel and look at – for example, a baby mirror, a soft cuddly toy – and things to hold, shake and bang – for example, bells and bricks. Encourage him or her to follow toys with his or her eyes – for example, blow bubbles/balloons in front of him or her or use finger puppets. You can also play hiding games with your baby: let a piece of tissue or scarf fall over your head or cover a toy and encourage your baby to pull it off. Play peek-a-boo games with your baby or try simple rhymes – for example, Round and round the garden where he or she can anticipate an action or word e.g. “boo”.

## **Share books with your baby**

Read and show your baby books with large, simple, colourful photographs.

**Most importantly,  
HAVE FUN  
with your baby!**

**If you have any questions about the information in this leaflet,  
please telephone 020 7813 8110 and talk to your speech and  
language therapist.**

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Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Foundation Trust  
Great Ormond Street  
London WC1N 3JH

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