

# Speech and Language Development - Early School Years

Parents are a child's best role model for speech and language development. Environments where children are encouraged to communicate provide a strong foundation for behavioral, academic and social success.

By the time children are four-and-a-half, they will have a vocabulary of approximately 2,000 words, they will be able to listen well, and 90-100 percent of their speech will be understood. Upon entering school, children should be able to speak in complete sentences with only minor grammatical errors. Throughout the school years, a child's language skills will continue to develop. Most children will master all English speech sounds by the age of seven or eight. Finally, the majority of language growth occurs in written language and vocabulary from about ages nine to eighteen.

## Warning Signs for Problems in Speech or Language Development

### The child:

- ! speaks using incomplete sentences.
- ! seems unable to follow oral directions.
- ! has difficulty playing or communicating with friends.
- ! struggles with reading and writing despite good spoken language skills.
- ! has problems swallowing or chewing.
- ! has frequent or long-term hoarseness.
- ! is unable to control the volume of his/her speech appropriately.
- ! has a history of chronic ear infections.
- ! stutters.
- ! has difficulty finding the right words.
- ! has difficulty telling you about his day (e.g., ideas are out of order).
- ! has difficulty playing imaginary games with other children and/or adults.
- ! produces speech that is difficult for strangers to understand.

## Ways to Encourage Children to Communicate

- ✓ Model correct pronunciation, but don't make your child repeat after you when he/she has said something wrong.
- ✓ When reading, pause to ask questions and encourage comments. Relate the story back to a personal experience ("This is like when we went camping.").
- ✓ Talk during daily routines. While you are cooking or getting ready for bed, describe what you are doing ("Now it's time to brush our teeth. Back and forth.").
- ✓ Give your child the opportunity to make verbal choices, such as "Do you want an apple or an orange?".
- ✓ Listen carefully and give your child enough time to speak. Do not interrupt.
- ✓ Use a slow, natural rate of speech when speaking to your child.
- ✓ Ask open-ended questions ("What should we buy at the store?") and expand on what your child is saying.
- ✓ Limit screen time and opt for shared activities instead. Duch et al. (2013) found that children who watched television for 2 hours or more a day had higher odds of low communication scores.
- ✓ Play guessing games like "I spy" and other word games.
- ✓ Imaginative play using dolls or action figures can help your child model social interactions. Include greetings, comments, questions or small talk.
- ✓ Read books that use rhyming, alliteration (words that begin with the same sound) and manipulation of sounds (e.g. nursery rhymes).



Untreated speech and language difficulties can affect behavior, social interaction and future academic success. If you have any concerns about your child's language development, contact a Speech-Language Pathologist.

**Early detection is vital!**

### Additional Resources:

ASHA: "Your Child's Communication Development: Kindergarten Through Fifth Grade"

The Hanen Centre: [Hanen.org](http://Hanen.org)

**For more information** on setting your child up for a literate life please visit our [Developing Reading and Writing Skills](#) information sheet.

If you are a parent of an English language learner (ELL), see our [English Language Learner \(ELL\)](#) information sheet.

### Information Gathered from:

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Duch, Helena & Fisher, Elisa & Ensari, Ipek & Font, Marta & Harrington, Alison & Taromino, Caroline & Yip, Jonathan & Rodriguez, Carmen. (2013). Association of Screen Time Use and Language Development in Hispanic Toddlers: A Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Study. *Clinical pediatrics*. 52. 10.1177/0009922813492881.

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## Getting Help

If you suspect a problem, consult a Registered Speech-Language Pathologist (R.SLP). To find a practitioner:

- Contact HEALTH LINK - Health Advice 24/7 at 8-1-1 or visit: [www.MyHealth.Alberta.ca](http://www.MyHealth.Alberta.ca)
- Enquire at a Public Health Centre or your child's school.
- Find a private practice SLP:
  - Search the Yellow Pages
  - Contact the Alberta Speech-Language Association of Private Practitioners (ASAPP) website at [www.asapp.ca](http://www.asapp.ca).



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Speech-Language Pathologists  
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