Language Promotion in the Early Years
A fact sheet for health professionals

Definitions

**Communication**
The process of exchanging ideas or information.

**Language**
How we communicate our thoughts and ideas using a set of symbols. Languages are usually spoken, but can also be based on gestures (sign language, Makaton), printed symbols (writing, Compic), or touch (braille). Language includes receptive language (comprehension, or understanding what others say) and expressive language (creating one’s own messages).

**Speech**
The motor behaviour by which most people communicate their language. Speech problems (also known as articulation problems) can occur without underlying language problems.

**Oral language involves the understanding and use of:**

**Phonology**
The sound system of a language, including its set of sounds (phonemes) and how they can be arranged in syllables/words. In the first year, the infant learns to discriminate the sounds of his/her own language, while progressively losing the ability to discriminate sounds from other languages.

**Semantics**
The meaning of language; understanding and use of words.

**Grammar**
The rules for combining words and word endings into meaningful sentences.

*Syntax* - the way words are combined to form grammatical sentences

*Morphology* - how words alter to make grammatical sense, eg word endings for past tense *-ed* (walked), plural *-s* (houses).

**Pragmatics**
The communicative use of language, which infants start to learn from birth.

*Nonverbal pragmatics* includes orienting to voice (or gesture), producing and interpreting facial expression, gesture, body posture, tone of voice, turn-taking etc.

*Verbal pragmatics* includes choosing words, maintaining topic, how much information to provide to one’s companion.
Early language
Language learning starts in the first year of life, and by four years of age most children are competent and quite sophisticated language users. Unlike reading, which must be actively taught, language learning takes place effortlessly in normally developing children exposed to adequate language models.

Early predictors of later language skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Babbling</th>
<th>The amount of babbling and the number of consonants used</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pragmatic functions</td>
<td>Social interaction (games like peek-a-boo, waving &quot;hi&quot; or &quot;bye&quot;) and &quot;behavioural regulation&quot; (e.g., requesting, protesting). Includes non-verbal communication like facial expression, eye gaze, joint attention.</td>
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<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td>Infants understand words before they use them. Early comprehension predicts later word production. Among late talkers, those who understand the least words make the least gains a year later.</td>
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<td>Combinatorial</td>
<td>For example, building a tower, putting a toy person in a toy car, or pounding play skills pegs with a hammer. Precedes symbolic (pretend) play. Higher levels of combinatorial play skills predict higher levels of receptive language, and earlier onset of combinatorial play skills predicts earlier onset of speech.</td>
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What is language delay?
Language delay can be defined as overall delay in language skills relative to other skills, and is the most common single difficulty in the preschool years. When language delay occurs with delays in other skills (e.g., gross motor skills, cognitive/play skills), it is often termed global developmental delay.

Why is language delay important?
Language delay can have a major impact on a child’s well-being. Many children who are slow to develop basic language skills will experience language, literacy, and academic difficulties throughout their childhood. Language delay is also associated with emotional/behavioural problems (including ADHD) and social adjustment problems such as social withdrawal, loneliness, and anxiety. These impacts can last into adulthood. Reducing the prevalence and morbidity of language impairment could have huge benefits for young children.

Prevalence of language delay
Estimates of the prevalence of language delay in young children vary widely, because of differences in how it is defined and measured. About 20-30% of infants have delayed communication milestones at age 8-12 months. At age two, about 15% of children are “late talkers” (less than 50 single words, no two-word utterances). Of these, about a third are still delayed at age 4 years; a third catch up, but still have subtle weaknesses in language abilities and literacy; and a third seem to catch up completely. About 5-8% of 4-5 year-old children have developmental impairments of speech and language.

Universal language promotion
Evidence suggests that early promotion is the key to producing a positive impact on developmental outcomes such as language development, especially for infants and toddlers with early signs of communication delay. It is much more difficult to
re-direct developmental outcomes later in childhood than to prevent negative
effects from occurring in the first place.

In the universal setting, professionals can help by:

- **Promoting** the importance of parent-child communication at well-child visits. Brief discussions with take-home written messages on many occasions are more helpful than one or two longer sessions.

- **Providing information**, for example how to follow the child’s lead (see below), suitable television programs and viewing habits, library resources

- **Modelling** communicative behaviours, e.g. enjoying a book with the child, at well-child visits

**Techniques for parents**

Of course, parents promote children’s language acquisition. Promoting the communicative aspects of language is more important than trying to teach the structural aspects such as grammar. The following techniques can be used by parents every day - they are best used in natural, meaningful conversations, rather than trying to “teach” the child.

**General parent techniques**

**Watch with child about everyday activities**

- **“Follow the child’s lead”**
  - Watch, respond to and talk about what the child is interested in, looking at, or playing with.

- **Natural consequences**
  - *Child: points, and says: “Ah!” Mother: “Oh, you want an apple! Here you are!”*

- **Motherese**
  - Talk in a higher pitch, using words and sentences just slightly more complex than those used by the toddlers themselves.

- **Power of play**
  - Play is fun, encourages turntaking, involves repetition and integrates many of the senses. Examples include early social games, such as "peek-a-boo" and "gonna get you" and ball games, or pretend -games when a child is a little older.

- **Share books**
  - Read, look, talk, touch, sing, repeat, retell, reread, reread, reread...!

- **Television**
  - Choose and watch a video or TV program **with** the child. Look for:
    - simple language
    - actions or pictures that go with the words (making things, dancing, big hugs)
    - story telling
    - lots of repetition
    - communication between adults, between children, between adults and children
    - programs that allow adults or children to make mistakes
  - Talk about the program with the child after it’s finished.
Specific suggestions about talking with young children

Recasting  Rephrasing something the child has said in a different way.

Echoing  Repeating what a child says, especially if it is an incomplete phrase or sentence.

Expanding  Restating, in a slightly more sophisticated sentence, what a child has said.
Child: “Daddy car.”  Mother: “Daddy’s driving the car”

Extending  Adding new information to what the child has said.
Child: “Daddy car.”  Mother: “It’s a red car”

Labelling  Frequently saying the names of objects (especially things that are familiar and important to the baby) or the sounds objects/animals make.

Additional reading
Reach Out and Read  http://www.reachoutandread.org
The Hanen Centre  http://www.hanen.org
The First Words Project  http://firstwords.fsu.edu
Sure Start  http://www.surestart.gov.uk/home.cfm
Speech Pathology Australia Fact Sheets, eg Helping your baby to talk  http://speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/pages/fact%20sheets/factsheets.html
Caroline Bowen  http://members.tripod.com/Caroline_Bowen/devel1.htm

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<th>Normal development</th>
<th>Potential areas of concern</th>
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<td><strong>Speech sounds</strong></td>
<td><strong>Expressive language</strong></td>
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<td><strong>0-1 years</strong></td>
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<td>Cooing after six weeks, babbling from six months, increasing feeling of child experimenting with sounds.</td>
<td>Gradually begins to use specific sounds in specific contexts eg 'woof' for all animals.</td>
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<td><strong>1-2 years</strong></td>
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<td>Initially uses strings of intonation ('jargon'), which clearly included speech sounds. These gradually become assimilated into recognisable words.</td>
<td>Words appear slowly at first but child often has a substantial vocabulary by two years. May be beginning to combine words by this stage.</td>
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<td><strong>2-3 years</strong></td>
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<td>A good range of sounds, though there may be difficulties with fricatives /f/ /sh/ /s/ etc.</td>
<td>2 and 3 word utterances. Language used for a variety of purposes: possession/ assertion/ refusal/ attribution etc.</td>
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<td><strong>3-4 years</strong></td>
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<td>Most speech sounds correct. May have difficulties with /ch/ or /j/. Intelligibility may decline when excited.</td>
<td>Talks increasingly fluently. Able to refer to past and future events. Marks tense with –ed etc, but there may be some confusion eg 'I goed to the park'.</td>
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<td><strong>4-5 years</strong></td>
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<td>Completely intelligible except for occasional errors.</td>
<td>Grammatical errors may persist but rarely affect the meaning. 4-6 word sentences used consistently. Question forms eg 'why?' now common. Able to construct own stories.</td>
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**General points to look out for**
- Family history of speech or language difficulties
- Concerns about parent-child interaction
- Any history of hearing difficulties
- Associated difficulties with behaviour or attention

(Source: Sure Start: Promoting Speech and Language Development. DfES Publications 2001. Nottingham UK. Can be reproduced for education or training purposes if source acknowledged.)