

**All children are different.  
All children matter.**



**Supporting language development for all  
children.**





If a child is not achieving earlier communication levels it will be difficult for them to learn skills higher up the communication pyramid.

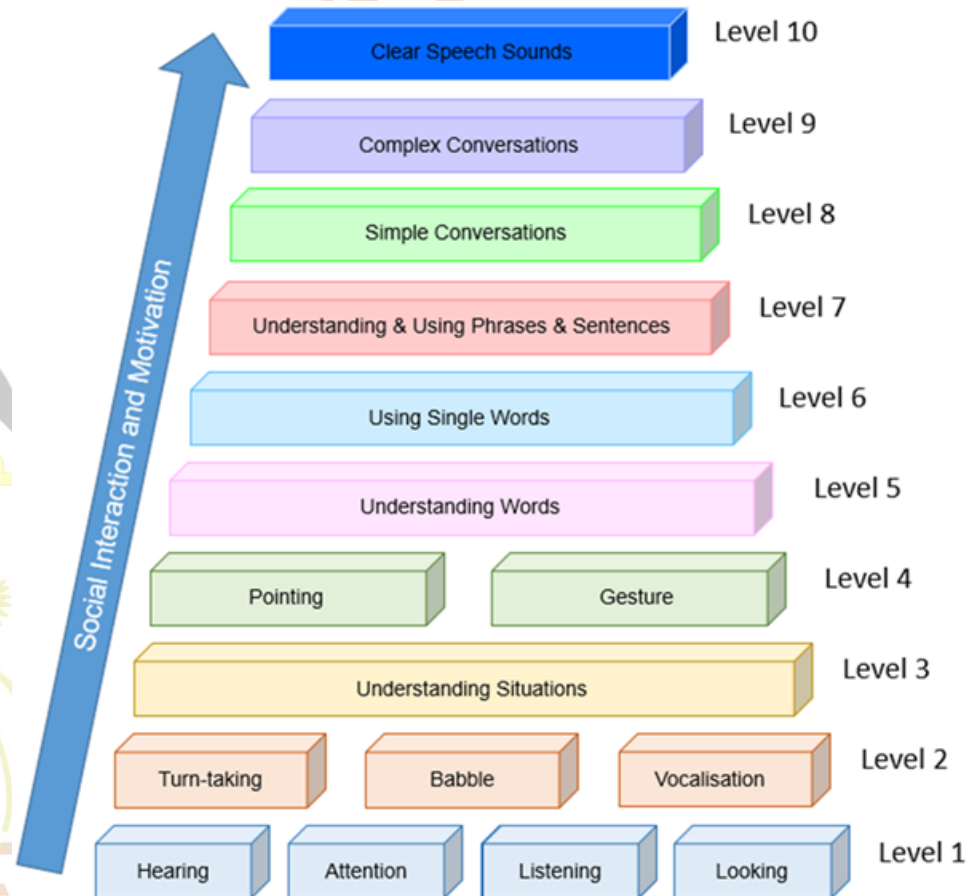
## Language and Communication Development from Birth to 5 Years

In order to develop spoken language children need to develop many other skills as well. If a child finds early communication skills such as sharing attention or understanding situations difficult it will also be more difficult for them to learn the higher level skills such as understanding and using spoken words.

Remember that children will progress through these levels at their own pace and that age norms are a rough guide for what to expect at different stages. Many children will have factors which impact on their ability to progress through the levels and will subsequently take longer to progress.

Further details on each stage can be found on:

[www.nhsggc.org.uk/kids/healthcare-professionals/paediatric-speech-and-language-therapy/building-blocks-of-language](http://www.nhsggc.org.uk/kids/healthcare-professionals/paediatric-speech-and-language-therapy/building-blocks-of-language)





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Birth - 6 months

**Vocalisations and Babbling:**

Babies begin to vocalise from an early age to show feelings e.g. crying when distressed or making high pitched noises when excited.

Babies may begin to babble around 6 months.

**Look out for:**  
Does not vocalise when excited.

**Hearing:**

<1 month: Will turn head to a familiar sound/voice.

6 months: Gets excited when they hear voices coming by kicking, waving their arms or making noises.

**Look out for:**  
Birth: Does not startle or cry at loud noises. Doesn't stop in response to a voice.  
3-4 months: Doesn't turn towards a sound.  
5-6 months: Doesn't notice you till they see you.

**Looking:**

Babies begin to look at faces from birth and begin to give eye contact from birth.

**Look out for:**  
The baby does not look at faces or motivating things.

**Listening:**

Babies begin to listen to voices and attend to spoken language.

Babies turn to the sound of voices and music such as the radio or TV.

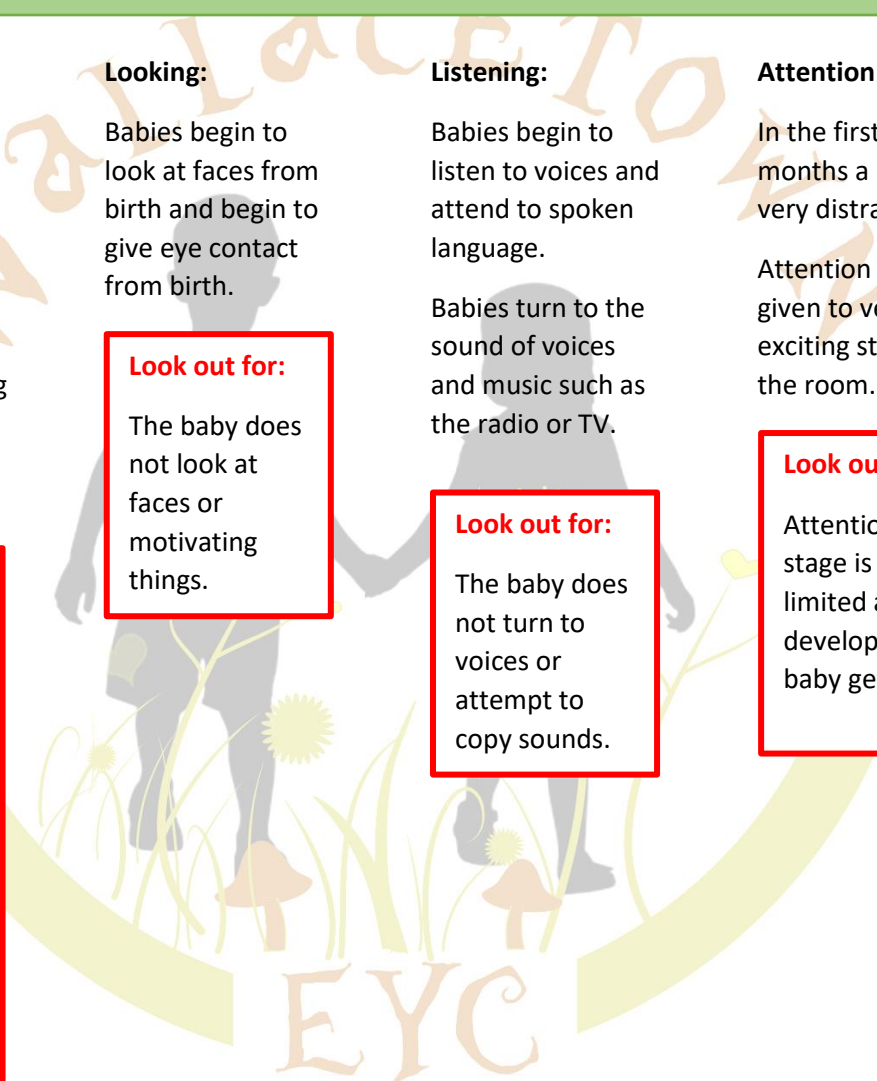
**Look out for:**  
The baby does not turn to voices or attempt to copy sounds.

**Attention:**

In the first 6 months a baby is very distractible.

Attention is only given to very exciting stimulus in the room.

**Look out for:**  
Attention at this stage is very limited and will develop as the baby gets older.





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## 6 - 12 months

### Babble:

Babies commonly begin to babble at around 6-7 months.

They will likely babble the same kind of sounds over and over and try to copy babble which an adult makes.

#### Look out for:

Has not started to babble by 8 months.

### Hearing:

9 months: Attends to music or singing, imitates speech/non speech by blowing raspberries, and responds to name.

12 months: Can track sounds coming from behind them. Look at you when you speak or call name.

#### Look out for:

Doesn't babble or try to repeat sounds, prefers vibratory sounds.

### Turn taking:

Babies begin to take turns in simple activities such as copying babbling or making noises together with an adult.

#### Look out for:

Not displaying early copying of babbling/noises

### Understanding Words:

9 months: Understands their own name.

Babies will begin to understand common words which they hear every day such as 'mum' 'dad' 'no' 'bye-bye'.

Babies continue to be heavily reliant on visual cues around them to understand the meaning of language.

#### Look out for:

Not responding to their name by 12 months and has not started to show an understanding of common words.

### Understanding Situations:

Babies begin to link activities such as if they cry they get comfort or when they hear the tap it is bath time.

#### Look out for:

Does not begin to link common everyday activities e.g. doesn't show excitement when they see a parent preparing food in the kitchen.

### Gesture and pointing:

6 months: Open/close fist to show that they want something.

9 months: Give objects and shake their heads

10 -11 months: raise their arms to get picked up and wave.

9-12months: point. Initially may use whole hand or adult's finger and then begin to use own index finger.

#### Look out for:

The age at which a baby learns gestures can vary considerably but all babies would be expected to make some gestures by 12 months.



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12 - 18 months

**Single Words and Babble:**

A baby's first words will frequently develop around 12 months with a few further words developing after this.

Babies will likely use a combination of gestures, objects and words to communicate.

Babies will continue to extend their babble into longer strings of babble with speech like intonation.

**Look out for:**  
No single words by 18 months.  
Does not babble in extended strings of babble.

**Hearing:**

Babies show an interest in noises and turn to sounds.

A baby may show distress at sudden loud noises.

Babies can track sounds coming from behind and look at you when you call their name.

**Look out for:**  
Does not respond to sudden noises or being spoken to.

**Turn Taking:**

Babies continue to engage in turn taking such as babbling a conversation or copying simple play.

**Look out for:**  
No interest in interacting with people such as babbling together or simple games such as tickle games.

**Understanding of Words and Situations:**

Babies will begin to understand further words and can follow simple 1 key word instructions.

Babies can begin to give objects when asked for by an adult.

Babies continue to link cause and effect activities throughout the day.

**Look out for:**  
Does not follow simple 1 key word instructions and does not react when they hear common motivating words such 'mummy' or their favourite toy.

**Attention and Listening:**

Can attend to an activity, particularly of their own choosing for a couple of minutes but need to block out all other distractions.

Attention is described as rigid and inflexible.

**Look out for:**  
Attends to tasks of their choosing for less than 2 minutes.

**Gesture:**

Babies continue to learn further gestures such as clapping their hands, nodding their head and putting their hand out for 'wait'.

**Look out for:**  
Limited use of gestures as part of communication.



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18 – 24 months

**Single Words and Babble:**

Children will continue to learn to use new single words. Likely 10-20 words by 24 months.

Long strings of babble with some discernible words noted in the babble.

Expressive language is heavily reliant on gestures and objects with some spoken words.

**Look out for:**

Fewer than 10 words by 24 months.

Limited use of gestures/objects to support communication.

**Speech:**

Children begin to develop early speech sounds including p, b, t, d, n, m, w

Children may be very difficult to understand, parents may need to interpret to less familiar listeners.

**Look out for:**

No consonant sounds used in babble or spoken words.

Limited speech sounds could be indicative of a hearing loss.

**Play and Social Communication:**

Children begin to engage in imaginative play such as pretending to talk on a telephone.

Children enjoy social and people games such as tickling or nursery rhymes.

Simple turn taking developing in play.

Children are unlikely to engage much with peers at this stage

**Look out for:**

No imaginative play.

Limited interaction with familiar adults.

**Understanding of Words and Situations:**

Children will confidently understand short 1 key word instructions and begin to point to common things on demand e.g. point to body parts or common objects.

**Look out for:**

Limited understanding of simple instructions. E.g. cannot point to common everyday objects.

No response to language unless a visual gesture is used. E.g. pointing or showing an object.

**Attention and Listening:**

Children will continue to develop their ability to listen and attend to tasks, particularly if they are motivating.

Children will continue to have rigid attention and not shift attention easily.

Children will respond to familiar voices and sounds.

**Look out for:**

Not able to attend to motivating activities for at least 2 minutes.

Limited attention when a child is spoken to.



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24 – 36 months

**Expressive Language:**

Uses between 50 – 300 words like ‘juice’, ‘car’, ‘biscuit’.

Starting to put short sentences together with 2 or 3 words e.g. “more juice”

Asking simple questions such as “what that?” “who that?”

Sings parts of familiar songs/nursery rhymes

**Look out for:**

Has less than 50 words by 30 months

Never links 2 words together

**Speech:**

Confidently using p, b, t, d, m, n, w and vowel sounds in speech.

May still be very difficult to understand to unfamiliar listeners but familiar listeners are usually able to tune in.

May get very frustrated if not understood.

**Look out for:**

Not using early speech sounds by 36 months.

Even familiar listeners find the child very difficult to understand.

**Play and Social Communication:**

Enjoys pretend play like feeding dolly or pretending to drive a car and usually making noises or talking while playing.

Shows interest in other children and may play alongside them.

Seeks out interaction with other people and wants to share enjoyment.

Makes consistent eye contact when communicating and is becoming more confident at turn-taking

**Look out for:**

Lack of interest in social play or interaction

Does not show any pretend play.

Limited eye contact.

**Understanding of Language:**

Children begin to understand a range of words including common action words and descriptive words.

They can likely understand between 200 and 500 words.

Children can begin to follow a 2 key word instruction from 2.5 years.

Children begin to be able to answer some why questions

**Look out for:**

Limited understanding of common action words and descriptive words.

Not able to follow a 2 key word instruction by 36 months.

**Attention and Listening:**

Attention is still single channelled but beginning to be able to attend to adults.

May enjoy listening to a short story.

Beginning to switch attention between adults and task.

**Look out for:**

Attention span less than 4 minutes.

Significant difficulty shifting attention.



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36 - 48 months

**Expressive Language:**

Talks in 3-4 word sentences most of the time.

Asks questions, e.g. what, where, who?

Begins to use small words such as 'the' and 'is'.

**Look out for:**

Only using two word combinations

Very limited vocabulary

Never asks questions

**Speech:**

Children are able to use all earlier speech sounds and also use k, g, f, h, y by 48 months.

Children are largely understood by familiar listeners and frequently understood by unfamiliar people.

**Play and Social Communication:**

Interested in friends and beginning to play with them.

Enjoys make believe and role play.

Able to have short back and forth conversations.

**Look out for:**

No interest in playing with other children.

Limited imaginative play.

Restricted play interests.

**Understanding of Language:**

Can understand up to three key word instructions.

Understands common action and describing words.

Understanding more concepts e.g. In/on/under

Can answer simple 'why' questions such as who, where, what.

**Look out for:**

Not able to answer questions including common descriptive words.

Not able to follow a 3 key word instruction by 48 months.

**Attention and listening:**

Attention remains single channelled but child is more able to control their attention.

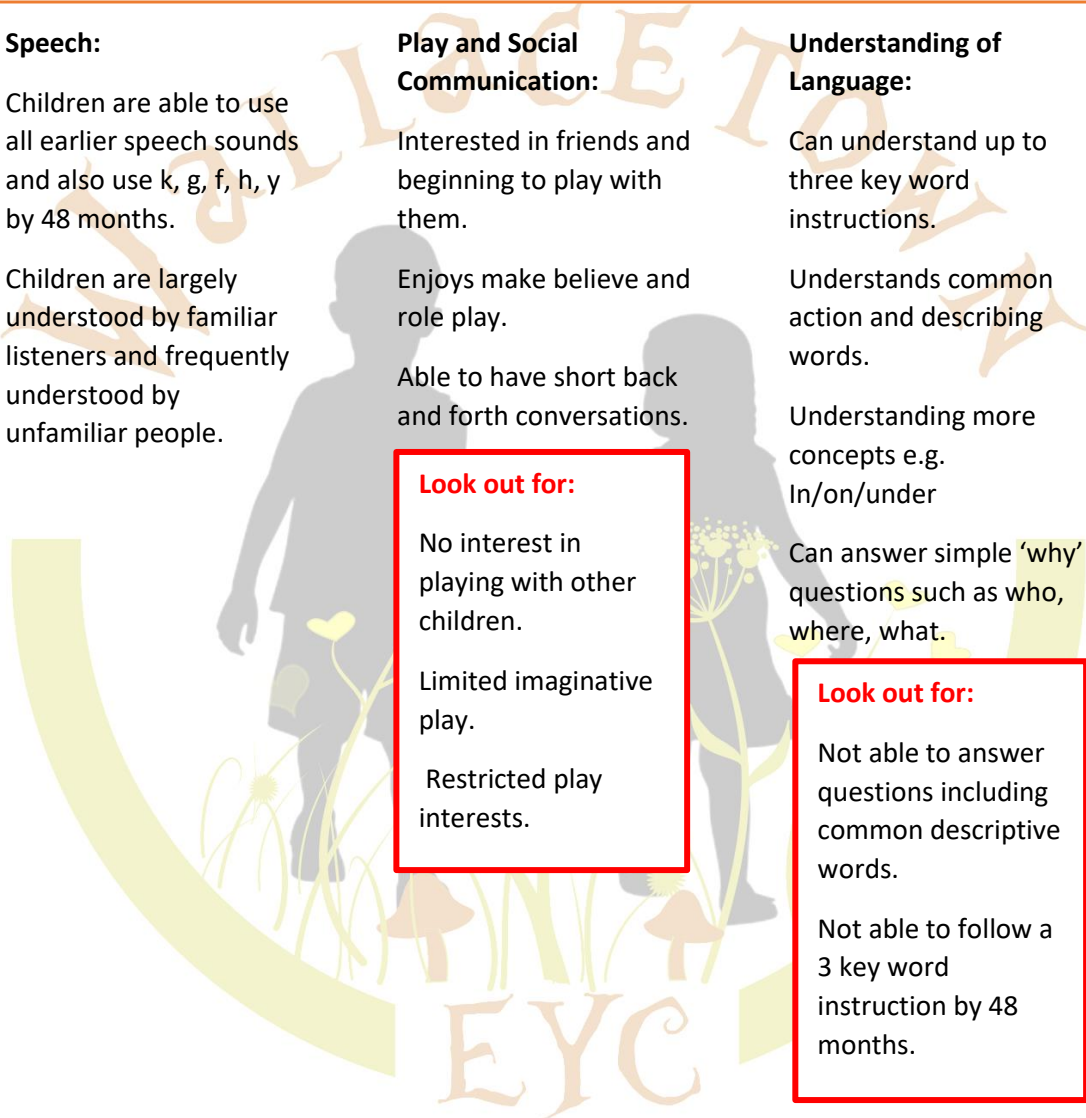
Child is able to switch between task and adult spontaneously.

A child can attend to an activity for 6-8 minutes at 3 years and may be able to attend for longer when engaging in a very motivating activity.

**Look out for:**

Not able to attend to a motivating task for more than 5 minutes.

Significant difficulty shifting attention.







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4 years

**Expressive Language:**

Vocabulary Of 3000-5000 words

Can plan, question, negotiate, predict and reason

Can tell long stories and describe events that have already happened.

Can join sentences together using 'and' and 'because'

**Look out for:**

Sentences don't make sense.

Struggles to describe events.

Small vocabulary with few descriptive word and concepts.

**Speech:**

Should be understood most of the time, even to unfamiliar adults.

Will still often have problems with more difficult sounds.

Uses earlier sounds and also begins to use s, ng by 72 months

**Look out for:**

Not using earlier speech sounds confidently.

Frequently not understood.

Frustration when communicating because they are not understood.

Poor phonological awareness.

**Play and Social Communication:**

Elaborate make-believe play e.g. Dressing up

Will react to other people's facial expressions and feelings

Understands sharing and turn-taking in a range of activities.

May enjoy taking the lead and 'teach' others in play.

**Look out for:**

Lack of flexibility

Play is repetitive or lacks imagination

Poor social skills in play. Difficulty sustaining an interaction with peers or an adult.

**Understanding of Language:**

Understands complex instructions and can follow instructions of 4 key words by 60 months.

Understands and often uses colour, number and time related words

Can answer questions about 'why'

**Look out for:**

Unable to follow instructions.

Does not respond appropriately within a simple conversation

**Attention and Listening:**

Attend to activities with other children in a small group

Can focus on an activity for 8-12 minutes.

Able to integrate attention to multiple channels for short periods of time.

Can attend to verbal instructions without needing to look at the adult giving the instruction.

**Look out for:**

Very distractible.

Can attend to a task for less than 8 minutes.

Struggles to shift attention.



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5 years

**Expressive Language:**

Vocabulary of 4000-5000 words.

Forms longer sentences of 6+ words.

Joins sentences together with 'and' and 'because'

Grammar structures are developing but immaturities are still expected, particularly with irregular structures.

Children are able to talk about both past tense and future tense.

**Look out for:**

Small vocabulary.

Short sentences with mostly key words.

Difficulty with tenses.

**Speech:**

Confidently using earlier speech sounds and also uses ng, s confidently.

May use l, sh, v, z, ch, dg and blends such as sp, pl.

Will still likely find r, th and challenging as well as many consonant blends.

Should be fully understood most of the time.

**Look out for:**

Not understood most of the time.

Frustration around communication.

Not using earlier speech sounds confidently.

Poor phonological awareness.

**Play and Social Skills:**

Begins to learn how to communicate differently with different people and in different settings.

Seeks out play with peers and engages in a variety of different imaginative and role play.

Is able to share and take turns confidently most of the time.

**Look out for:**

Difficulties interacting with peers.

Repetitive play and limited imaginative play.

Limited eye contact.

**Understanding of Language:**

Can follow several part instructions and instructions with 4+ key words.

Can understand a wide variety of words and concepts such as before/after, next week.

Can follow a conversation well.

**Look out for:**

Child is not able to follow several part instructions.

Child struggles to follow a conversation.

**Attention and Listening:**

Attention skills are increasingly sustained and integrated.

Can listen to and follow multiple instructions.

Can attend to tasks for 12-18 minutes.

**Look out for:**

Attention span of 10 minutes or less.

Struggles to shift attention between tasks.



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## Strategies

### Birth to 6 months

Hearing: Does the baby turn round when they hear sudden noises behind them? If you have concerns regarding hearing, speak to the Health Visitor for a potential audiology request.

Attention: Place yourself face to face to the baby and limit other distractions such as the TV or radio.

Listening: Play early people games such as peekaboo or sing nursery rhymes.

Looking: Babies are drawn to faces, make sure that you are facing your baby when talking to them as this encourages eye contact and engagement.

Vocalisations and Babbling: Respond to your baby's vocalisations. Copy the sounds which they make throughout the day. Talk about the things which you do together using simple language of 1-2 words.

Items highlighted in green continue to be relevant through all ages and stages.

### 6 to 12 months

Hearing: Continue to look out for any concerns regarding the baby's hearing such as if there is no babbling or they do not begin to turn to their name.

Babble: Copy the wee noises which the baby makes throughout the day and play around with the intonation and length of babble. Model other early sounds such as 'mmm' 'dadada' 'beebee' 'nnnnnn'

Turn Taking: Copy the baby's sounds and make your own sounds back to them – you're having a conversation! Play early turn taking games such as blowing bubbles and waiting for the baby's reaction and engagement with you and then blow more.

Understanding Situations: Create clear routines throughout the day which helps the baby to learn what to expect. Use simple 1-2 words to talk about what you are doing.

Gesture and Pointing: Include gestures throughout the day such as waving hello/goodbye, clapping your hands when you have done something or put your hand out to request that they come with you.

Understanding Words: Use everyday words throughout the day and model these along with the object or gesture. Use the same words many times to help the baby to understand them. Leave pauses to let the child process the words.

### 12 to 18 months

Hearing: As with earlier stages.

Attention and listening: Engage in motivating experiences such as tickle games, peek a boo etc to develop attention and listening. Follow the baby's lead in play and join in.

Understanding of Words and Situations: Continue to model single words about what you are doing/playing with and show the meaning where possible. Begin to practice short instructions such as pointing to body parts or favourite toys.

Single words and babble: Interpret your baby's babble and use the words which they would have used if they could. Respond to any words which they attempt and repeat them back so that they can hear them clearly.

Turn Taking: Continue to engage in people games and activities which the baby enjoys.

Gesture: Include early gestures throughout the day. Model pointing and respond to the baby's pointing and gestures. Model the words which they would have used if they could have.

### 18 – 24 months

Attention and Listening: Continue to engage in motivating activities for the child. Say the child's name or lightly touch their arm to catch their attention before speaking to them. The child will struggle to follow your language if they are still attending to their play.

Understanding of Language: Continue to model simple language throughout the day of 1-2 single words to make it as easy as possible for the child to learn new words. Talk about what you are doing throughout the day and continue to show the meaning. Give the child time to process what you have said – a good rule of thumb is to silently count to 5 before you do anything else.

Single Words and Babble: Continue to respond to any babble and single words which the child uses. Interpret what they are saying.

Play and Social Communication: Join in the child's play, sing nursery rhymes, look at books together and comment on what you see. Play ready steady go games e.g. blowing bubbles or rolling a ball.

Speech: Repeat the words which the child says slowly and clearly so that they can hear how you say words.



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### 24 – 36 months

**Attention and Listening:** Face them at their level when you are speaking to them and encourage them to look towards you. Let them know when it's time to listen, use their name to gain attention.

**Understanding of Language:** Continue to use simple language with the child and focus on teaching them action words and descriptive words to support them to gain the vocabulary to combine words. Practice simple 2 key word instructions. Give extra processing time after modelling language.

**Expressive Language:** Repeat back what the child has said and add a word onto what they said to show them how to expand their sentences. Interpret children's strings of babble with some discernible words into what they would have said if they could have.

**Play and Social Communication:** Follow their lead in play and join in with them. Play finger games and action songs and share books, interactive books and books with textures. Talk about your play and focus on modelling the language rather than asking the child unnecessary questions as this puts pressure on them to speak when they may not want to.

**Speech:** Copy early sounds they are making and model new sounds through play e.g. toys making noises or in front of a mirror. Encourage the child to show you what they mean if you don't understand them.

### 36 – 48 months

**Attention and Listening:** As previous stages. Encourage the child to attend to motivating activities for longer by e.g. adding in more toys or encouraging further turns in play.

**Understanding of Language:** Continue to add words throughout the day and begin to practice following slightly longer 3 key word instructions e.g. give me the horse, the pen and the doll. When giving instructions throughout the day, reduce the length and complexity to help the child fully understand it. Continue to focus on action and descriptive words and add in simple concepts such as in/on/under. Begin to ask who, what and where questions through play and model the answer if the child doesn't know.

**Expressive Language:** Repeat back what the child has said using the correct grammar and sentence structure but do not put pressure on them to repeat it. Focus on what the child is saying rather than how they are saying it. Continue to model new words and showing the meaning of them. Gestures and visuals continue to be very helpful.

**Play and Social Communication:** Encourage and facilitate peer play. Engage in role play, small world play and songs/nursery rhymes.

**Speech:** Practice phonological awareness activities such as clap when they hear a word and syllable clapping. Repeat what the child says using correct pronunciation.

### 4 years

**Attention and Listening:** As earlier stages. Practice attending in small groups of peers and taking turns. Praise good listening and use visuals to reinforce listening rules. Play listening games, Ready, Steady, Go or Simon Says

**Understanding of language:** Include concepts such as time, number and colours into learning. Model why questions and answers. Practice following longer instructions through play.

**Expressive Language:** Encourage the child to talk about experiences/stories which have already happened and continue to model grammar structures. Allow the child to take their time and show that you are listening and interested in what they are saying by using eye contact, smiling, nodding etc.

**Play and Social Communication:** Join in with pretend play and encourage turn-taking and sharing with peers. Include feelings in activities and introduce easy concepts such as colour monsters. Let the child take a 'teacher' role in play.

**Speech:** Continue phonological awareness activities such as syllable clapping, rhyme, identifying sounds. Repeat back sounds which the child may find challenging. Continue to encourage them to show you what they mean and let them know which words you have understood so that they know what to repeat. Give them time to talk so that they do not rush and stumble on sounds.

### 5 years

**Attention and Listening:** As previous stages. Practice several step instructions through play e.g. Simon says touch your nose and rub your belly.

**Understanding of Language:** Continue to model concepts to the child and focus on more complex concepts such as before/after and future concepts. Encourage the child to ask if they haven't understood something. Introduce words which mean the same.

**Expressive Language:** Support longer sentences by modelling use of 'and' and 'because'. Repeat back what the child has said using the correct grammar. Talk about feeling words.

**Play and Social Communication:** Continue to encourage peer play and expand on imaginative play and role play. Keep conversations going by commenting on the play with some questions if needed.

**Speech:** Play rhyming games, syllable clapping, identifying sounds, same sound/different sound, what sound does a word begin s with.