



**What to expect when  
in communication – a guide  
for parents**

## 12-18months

**Children develop skills at different rates but by 18 months, usually children will:**

- Enjoy listening to music and singing, and sometimes move their body to 'dance' along to music.
- Enjoy looking at simple picture books together with an adult.
- Understand many more words than they can say, including the names of everyday objects like furniture, clothing and body parts.
- Understand some simple questions and instructions like 'where's teddy?' and 'kiss Mummy'.
- Say up to 20 single words (such as 'cup', 'daddy', 'dog') to ask for things or to point out what they see, even though they may not be very clear yet.
- Use a lot of babble and single words while they are playing. They often sound like they are saying little sentences even though you can't make out what the words are.
- Copy a lot of things adults say or do, like saying 'hi', waving bye-bye or clapping.
- Enjoy simple pretend play, such as giving dolly a drink or pretending to talk on the phone.
- Get your attention to show you or ask for things using pointing, actions or words.
- Start to get more independent although they still like to be near you.

## 18-24 months

Children develop skills at different rates but by two years, usually children will:

- Concentrate on their own activities for longer, such as playing with a toy they like.
- Sit and listen to simple stories with pictures.
- Understand at least 200 words.
- Understand more simple questions and instructions. For example, 'where is your shoe?' and 'show me your nose'.
- Understand simple action words (for example, 'kiss teddy' or 'dolly sleep').
- Copy sounds and words a lot.
- Say 50 or more single words, even though many of these are not very clear yet.
- Start to put short sentences together with 2-3 words, such as 'more juice' or 'bye nanny'.
- Ask questions like 'what's that?' or 'Where going?'
- Make the sounds of familiar animals eg: 'moo' for cow.
- Enjoy pretend play with their toys, such as feeding teddy.
- Try out new things and explore the world around them more actively. They will often choose their own activities and may not always like being told what to do.
- Use a more limited number of sounds in their words than adults – often these sounds are p, b, t, d, m, n and w. Children will still make mistakes with how they say words at this stage. Families can usually understand their child about half the time.
- Sometimes get frustrated if people don't understand them.

## 2-3 years

**Children develop skills at different rates, but by 3 years usually children will:**

- Listen to and understand a simple story with pictures, although they can still get easily distracted at times.
- Understand longer instructions, such as 'make teddy jump' or 'put daddy's cup on the table'.
- Understand simple 'who', 'what' and 'where' questions.
- Understand the words 'big' and 'little'.
- Understand lots of words, at least 300.
- Put 4 or 5 words together to make short sentences, such as 'me want more juice' or 'he took my ball'.
- Ask lots of questions. They will want to find out the name of things and learn new words.
- Use action words such as 'run' and 'fall' as well as words for the names of things.
- Start to add 's' to words to show there is more than one of something. For example, 'shoe' becomes 'shoes'.
- Can say the sounds p, b, t, d, m, n, w, k and g in words when they are talking. They may still make mistakes with how they say words, and might have difficulty saying more complicated sounds like sh, ch, th and r. However, people who know the child can mostly understand them.
- Start to be interested in other children's play and want to join in.
- Sometimes sound as if they are stammering or stuttering. They are usually trying to share their ideas and can't quite think of how to say it. This can be a perfectly normal

stage to go through, however if it continues for more than a few months you may want to seek some advice. See our stammering factsheet for more information.

- Start to talk about themselves, for example they can say what they like and don't like.
- Answer simple questions about objects, for example 'which one do we eat with?'

### **3-4 years**

**Children develop skills at different rates, but by 4 years usually children will:**

- Listen to storybooks with pictures and answer some questions about a story you've just read together.
- Understand and often use words for colour (e.g. 'red'), number (e.g. 'three fingers') and time (e.g. 'tomorrow').
- Start to be able to answer questions about 'why' something has happened, although this still might be at quite a basic level.
- Use sentences that have 4 – 6 words in them, for example 'I want to play with cars'.
- Start to link 2 sentences together by using 'and'. For example, 'I went to the park and I had ice cream'.
- Talk about the future and the past. For example, 'I will watch you' or 'I jumped down'. Their sentences aren't exactly like adults' yet, so they may still make some mistakes such as saying 'runned' for 'ran'.
- Answer simple problem-solving questions, for example 'What do you do when you're hungry/cold?'
- Tell a short story about something they have seen or experienced. For example, 'Two boys played with the ball. It went over the fence.'

- Enjoy make-believe play and start to play cooperatively with others.
- Start to like simple jokes even if they don't understand them.
- Start conversations with you and with other people.
- Use words instead of actions to argue with you or with their friends.
- Ask many questions using words like 'what', 'where', and 'why'.
- Can say the sounds p, b, t, d, m, n, w, k, g, s, f, l and y in words when they are talking. For example, they say 'sun' and 'car' as an adult would. They may still have difficulty using more complicated sounds like sh, ch, th and r. However, adults who don't know them can mostly understand them.
- Talk quite smoothly. They don't repeat the first sound in words or get stuck trying to get a word out.

#### **4-5 years**

**Children develop skills at different rates, but by 5 years usually children will:**

- Listen to and follow requests without having to stop what they are doing. For example, they can listen to you and answer while they carry on playing.
- Understand longer instructions, for example 'Find your crayons, draw a picture and give it to Grandma'.
- Understand and answer questions about simple stories with no pictures.
- Choose their own play mates and play make believe games, such as pretending to be Spiderman.
- Take turns in longer conversations and stay on the same topic.
- Understand words like 'first' and 'next' in a sentence. For example, 'First we're going to the shop, next we'll play in the park'.

- Understand words such as 'above', 'below' and 'between' to describe the position of things.
- Use long and detailed sentences. For example, 'We went to the park but we came home because Joe hurt himself'. Don't worry if they still make little mistakes like saying 'sheeps' instead of sheep or 'goed' instead of went.
- Talk about things that have already happened or will happen in the future. For example, 'Yesterday we went to visit Auntie Jan'.
- Talk about things they imagine or make up, using words like 'I think...'
- Say most words clearly when they are talking – people who don't know them can understand them all the time. Don't worry if they still struggle with some sounds like th, str or r, or make little mistakes like saying 'wabbit' for rabbit, 'bow' for blow or 'sketti' for spaghetti.
- Talk quite smoothly. They don't repeat the first sound in words or get stuck trying to get a word out.

### **5-7 years**

**Children develop skills at different rates, but by 7 years, usually children will:**

- Focus on one thing for longer without being reminded.
- Follow and remember a story that is told over several days.
- Understand long instructions, for example, 'Put your toys back in the cupboard, go upstairs and find your swimming things'.
- Learn that the same word can mean two things, such as 'orange' the fruit and 'orange' the colour.

- Learn that different words can mean the same thing, such as 'minus' and 'take away'.
- Understand feelings and descriptive words like 'carefully', 'slowly' or 'surprised'.
- Talk for lots of different reasons, such as to share complex ideas, to solve problems or to tell jokes.
- Use long sentences and put the right endings on their words, for example 'My teddy likes **sitting** on a bed because beds are **softer**'.
- Use words like 'so', 'because' to join their sentences together. For example, 'It's my birthday so I'm saying up late'.
- Can take turns to talk in conversations with adults and children in lots of different situations, either with one person or in a group.
- Talk clearly so that unfamiliar people can understand them almost all of the time. They might still make mistakes in tricky words, like saying 'spash' instead of 'splash'.
- Talk quite smoothly and don't repeat the first sound in words or get 'stuck' trying to get a word out.

### **7-11 years**

**Children develop skills at different rates, but by 11 years, usually children will:**

- Use sentences to link their ideas together, make predictions and draw conclusions.
- Use sentences that normally have between 8 and 10 words (although often their sentences can be much longer).
- Can make up a complicated story including lots of information about the characters and what happened.



- Can talk using more advanced words, such as 'massive', 'enormous' or 'huge' instead of 'big'.
- Understand other points of view and show that they agree or disagree.
- Keep a conversation going by giving reasons and explaining choices.
- Start conversations with adults and children they don't know.
- Understand long requests with lots of information in them. For example, 'Please find the stripey bag at the top of my wardrobe and put it in the big cupboard in the kitchen'.
- Talk clearly so that everyone can understand them all the time.
- Talk quite smoothly and don't repeat the first sound in words or get stuck trying to get a word out.