

Ten facts: Speech and language development in early years

Early years practitioners have an amazing opportunity to help babies and young children develop their speech and language skills.

The ability to listen, understand and communicate is vital in order to function in society, whether through building relationships, education and learning or finding work.

How much do you know about how a child develops their speech and language skills?

We have put together ten key facts to get you thinking:

1. **The first three years of life are recognised as the most intensive period for acquiring speech and language skills**

These early years need to be filled with experiences of sound and language. Otherwise, delays in the development of language can occur

2. **Language and speech development are different**

Language is a set of shared rules that allows a person to express their ideas in a meaningful way and understand the ideas of another. The four main language skills are:

- Attention and listening
- Receptive language
- Expressive language
- Auditory processing and memory.

3. **Speech is talking**

It involves coordinating the action of the muscles of the lips, jaw, tongue and vocal cords in the throat to produce recognisable sounds. A speech disorder may present as a hesitation or stutter when talking. It could also be apraxia of speech where they have difficulty putting sounds and syllables in the correct order to form a word



4. **Most children develop receptive language skills before expressive language skills**

This means they can understand words long before they can say them. For example, a toddler may not say any words, but if they are asked to get their coat and shoes they are able to go and fetch them

5. **Most children and babies follow recognisable stages in their language development by relatively predictable stages**

For example, the use of the word “mama” or “dada” in a non-specific way starts around seven months, developing into recognising that they relate to mummy or daddy from around nine months. Gestures, such as waving ‘bye-bye’ are normally around nine months and recognisable words will start from around 11 months

6. **The average four-year-old will reportedly have a receptive vocabulary of 8,000 words and an expressive vocabulary of 2,300 words**

By the age of seven, they should typically be able to recognise and use around 10,000 words

7. **Language skills are known to develop more readily in environments with lots of sound, sights and consistent exposure to speech and language of others**

There are times within the early years where exposure to language and sound is received more readily by the brain in babies and young children and this time needs to be optimized to help them develop

8. **Attention and listening skills are essential for children to be able to recognise sounds and words, learn what they mean and how to use them**

Children tend to have naturally short attention spans and it is important to develop their ability to focus on activities for increasing periods of time. Children with communication troubles are often also identified as having poorer attention and difficulties concentrating

9. **A child may have difficulty keeping their attention some of the time or all of the time. Some problems can be easily rectified**

It could be down to too much background noise or distractions, adult language being too complicated or a middle ear infection, among many other reasons

10. **Nursery rhymes encourage listening skills**

Using rhythm and rhyme from birth helps kick start the auditory processing centres. It is well documented that children who can learn words of songs easily have strong pre-literacy skills and take to reading more easily.

Find out more

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