

# Speech and Language in the Early Years

*supporting school readiness*



This booklet is designed to help parents, caregivers, and educators understand the vital role of early speech and language development. Packed with practical tips and expert insights, it supports school readiness by building strong communication foundations, **because every child deserves the confidence to be heard.**

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# Normal Language Development

## Age

## Behaviour

1 month

- Responds to voice and sounds

3 months

- Coos (oo, ah)

4 months

- Responds to noise and voice by turning to sounds

6-9 months

- Babbles (ba, goo)
- Understands "no, own name, where's Daddy?"
- Uses intonation (sing song) patterns like adult speech
- copies others waving bye bye
- Turns in response to own name

# Normal Language Development

## Age

## Behaviour

9-12 months

- Two part babbling (dada, googoo)
- Babbles to self and with others
- Tries to copy sounds and noises (brmm for car)
- Uses sound patterns that are meaningful to baby but are not real words
- Waves or claps when asked

12-18 months

- Uses gestures, actions and facial expressions to express wants/needs
- Points to named objects
- Begins to use single words e.g:
  - naming words (mummy, ball)
  - doing words (drink, fall down)
  - negatives (no)
  - mummy drink (possession)
- Uses sounds in patterns like real words but cannot be understood by adults
- Attempts to imitate new words and familiar songs

18-24 months

- Begins to use 2 words together in different ways
  - Person/object + action (daddy drink)
  - Person + object (daddy [drink] milk)
  - Action + object (drink milk)
  - Action + place (go up)
  - Person/object + place (Mummy home)
  - Owner + Object (Billy car)
  - Description + Object (big car)
  - That/this + object (that bird)
- Vocabulary 25-50 words
- listens to a short story
- understands simple questions e.g. "where's that car?"

# Normal Speech Sound Development

## Can use by 3-4 Years

m (mine), n (no), h (hair), p (pear), b (big), ng (ring), w (walk), d (dog),  
g (go), t (tiger)

## Can use by 4-5 Years

f (fish), y (yes), k (car)  
sh (ship), ch (chair), j (jump), s (soap), z (zip),

## Can use by 5-6 Years

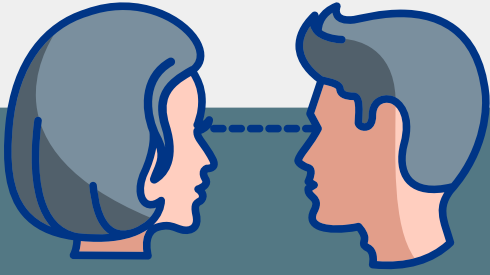
l (lolly), v (video), r (rabbit)

## Can use by 6-7 Years

th voiceless (thumb), th voiced (that)

*Most consonant blends (e.g. "pl" in "plane") should be mastered by the time children start school.*

# Pre-Verbal Skills and How to Develop Them



## Eye Contact

- Maintain eye contact to help children get more information through facial expressions and gestures.
- Place toys near your face to encourage looking.



## Attention

- Use one toy in many ways to prolong interest:
  - Balloons: blow, catch, draw faces, pop
  - Nesting cups: count, build, roll, hide, water/sand play
  - Blocks: build, line up, peek-a-boo, bang together



## Copying Movements

- Start by copying the child, then extend play and encourage imitation.
- Games: copying faces/sounds, banging blocks, pretend play with dolls/teddies

# Turn Taking, Play, Object Permanence



## Turn Taking

- Encourage early turn-taking to develop conversational skills.
- Games: balls, bean bags, wind-up toys, cars, posting boxes



## Play

- Important for language and imagination.
- Games: dolls, cars, ball games, playdough



## Object Permanence

- Understanding that objects still exist when out of sight.
- Games: posting boxes, peek-a-boo, hiding objects.

# Early Words to Teach Toddlers

## Naming Words

- Mummy, Daddy, child's name, relatives' names, car, ball, book, dog, cup, shoe, bag, apple, nana, bikkies, juice, milk, baby, nose, mouth, tummy

## Action/Doing Words

- Go, fall, make, want, stop, walk, push, pull, wash, drink

## More/ No Words

- More words: more, again, another
- No words: no, gone, all gone

## Describing & Place Words

- Big, little, hot, cold, wet, colours
- In, or, under

# Language Stimulation Suggestions & Tips

- Use action words and sounds during play (e.g. “brmm brmm” for cars)
- Use meaningful sounds (e.g. “sh” for sleep, “mm” for food)
- Sit with the child- be at the child’s level
- Extend attention span by joining play, reducing toys, showing new ways to play
- Play turn-taking games (e.g. tea party, bubbles)
- Model a range of word types:
- Naming, action, location, describing, “no/more” words

- Use short sentences (1–2 words)
- Interpret child’s babble and model correct words
- Encourage verbal responses over gestures
- Give choices to promote communication
- Expand on child’s words (e.g. “drink” → “yummy drink”)
- Leave silences to encourage initiation
- Sabotage routines to prompt communication (e.g. bath with no water)
- Use praise (hugs, smiles, attention, words)
- Make communication fun and engaging

# People Games

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People Games are simple, repetitive routines that involve at least two people to be fun (e.g., Peekaboo, tag). These games help children engage with parents and learn communication skills

**Important Tip:**

Play the game all the way through many times using the same words and actions. Once your child knows the game well, pause at key moments and WAIT for a response, this could be eye contact, a smile, a sound, an action, or a word.

# Part 1: Ideas for Children Learning to Play and Communicate

## Pillows

Place pillows on the floor like stepping stones. Help your child “jump” from pillow to pillow. Say “jump” before helping. Once familiar, pause and wait for your child to respond (look, smile, say “jump”).

1

## Laundry Basket

Pretend the basket is a boat and rock it back and forth. You can also help your child “fall” out. Once familiar, pause before rocking or tipping to encourage your child to initiate the action.

2

## Hat

Put a hat on your head and gently “bump” your child’s tummy, feet, or back. Talk about it (“Let’s bump Abby’s tummy”). Once familiar, pause before bumping to let your child respond or direct the action.

3

## Boxes

Place boxes upside down and hide a favourite item under one. Help your child find it. Once familiar, pause before lifting the box to encourage your child to ask or indicate.

4

## Where’s Mummy/Daddy?

One parent hides just outside the room while the other sits with the child and calls out the name. The hiding parent jumps out and hugs/tickles the child. Once familiar, pause before calling to let the child initiate.

5

# Part 2: Ideas for Children Who Use Words and Sentences

## Pillows

Use pillows as stepping stones. Point to where your child should jump. Once familiar, wait before pointing to encourage your child to choose or speak. Add vocabulary like “near” or “far” pillow.

1

## Laundry Basket

Pretend the basket is a boat with added actions: spin, fast/slow movement, waves (blue towel), and dumping into “water.” Wait for your child to request actions or choose toys to join. Add pretend play like swimming to the sofa before a “shark” gets them.

2

## Hat

Hide a small item under a hat. Give hints (“It’s for blowing your nose”) and let your child guess. Once familiar, wait before revealing to encourage communication. Try variations like using a sock or mitten.

3

## Boxes

Hide a picture of a family member under a box. Knock and ask “Is Auntie Tina here?” before lifting. Once familiar, pause and wait for your child to ask or indicate. Add fun by cutting a door in the box for tactile discovery.

4

## Where’s Mummy/Daddy?

Hide treats or toys in a room. Have your child find them by watching your eyes. Be at their level and look at the hidden object. If needed, point while looking to help guide them.

5

# Tips to Build Vocabulary: Repeat Words that Match Your Child's Interests

## 1, 2, 3, Repeat, repeat, repeat!

Children need to hear a new word many times before they can use it on their own. When you repeat a word in different situations with your child, you give them lots of opportunities to understand and eventually use it.

## Finding Words to Repeat

Research shows... variety is key!  
Your child needs to learn not only the names for things (e.g., "dog"), but also a variety of word types like:

- Action words (e.g., "jump")
- Describing words (e.g., "big")
- Location words (e.g., "up," "down," "under")
- Words for feelings (e.g., "happy," "sad," "tired")
- Social words (e.g., "night-night," "bye-bye")
- Words that express belonging (e.g., "my," "Mommy's")
- Question words (e.g., "what," "where")

- Example: Talking about a teddy bear
- Action: sleep, eat, hug
- Description: soft, big, all gone
- Location: up, down, under
- Feelings: happy, sad, tired
- Belonging: my, Mommy's
- Social: night-night, bye-bye
- Questions: what, where

# Tips to Build Vocabulary: Repeat Words that Match Your Child's Interests

## Look for words that...

1

### **MATCH YOUR CHILD'S INTERESTS**

E.g., If your child is playing with cars on a ramp, repeat "down" – "The car is going down!"

2

### **YOUR CHILD UNDERSTANDS AND COMMUNICATES WITH ACTIONS OR GESTURES**

E.g., Repeat "up" if your child raises their hands to be picked up but doesn't say "up".

3

### **YOU CAN USE IN A VARIETY OF SITUATIONS**

E.g., "Up" can be used when picking up your child, going up stairs, etc.

# How to repeat a word

Once you've identified a word that matches your child's interests, repeat it during fun, back-and-forth interactions by:

- Saying the word in a short sentence
- Emphasising the word
- Saying the sentence slowly
- Using an action, gesture, or object to show what the word means

## Important:

- There should never be pressure for your child to say the word after you, they will try when they're ready!

## Example- How to Repeat the Word "Down"

- Say: "Wheeee! The car went down!"
- Emphasise "down" by saying it louder
- Say the sentence slowly
- Point down to the car as you say the word
- **Avoid** saying "Say down" & **avoid** asking questions such as "where is it going? Is it going down?"

# School Readiness

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## What is school readiness?

We hear it all the time, but what exactly is *school readiness*?

## School Readiness is...

A term used to describe whether a child has the skills and preparedness to make a successful transition into school. It can be developed through specific activities, discussion, and opportunities to practice and expand their current skill set to increase the fundamental skills that are important for classroom success.

# Skills that are important for starting school

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Independently toilet and participate in other activities of self-grooming, like washing hands and getting dressed

Self-regulate or have some level of control over emotions and behaviour (this can look like being able to calm themselves down without lots and lots of help)

Listen to and follow instructions that have at least two parts (for example, 'Put your bag on the hook and sit on the ground')  
Sit upright; draw, and use scissors or glue (requiring muscle strength and coordination)

Play or socialise with others at an age-appropriate level (for example, sharing toys, asking others to play, being able to say 'no'; using basic manners when talking to others)

Tell a teacher or their peers their wants and needs in a way that can be clearly understood (for example, being able to say, 'I want... ' or 'I don't want...' and have speech without lots and lots of errors)

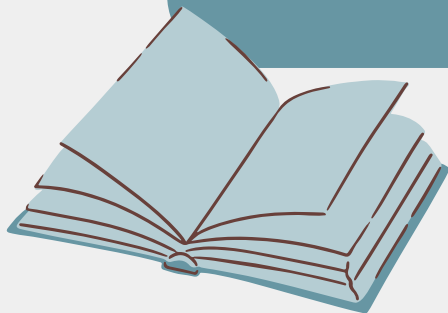
Recognise their written name and understand some rudimentary concepts about books (like what way we hold it, or how we turn a page).

# Speech Pathology Tips to Help Your Child Prepare for School

## Read, every single day!

Outside of a books content, they are also a great medium to start teaching pre-literacy concepts (or concepts that are fundamental to literacy success). While you are reading with your child, focus on showing and asking them about basic things to do with the book, such as:

- Where the front of the book is (and what way we hold it)
- Where the name of the book is
- How they turn a page carefully
- What page we read first (left to right!)
- What line we read first (top to bottom!)
- Where they can find a big letter and a small letter



*Book reading is such a powerful tool when it comes to helping your child increase their comprehension and vocabulary. In addition to the above questions, try incorporating questions when reading with your child to help them with their understanding and vocabulary development. You can do more than just read the story, talking about and asking questions regarding the story is just as helpful for language development.*

# Practice Recognising Names, Letters, and Numbers

It's important that your child can recognise their name in school as name labels are everywhere their clothes, bag cubbies, seat allocations, and whiteboards! Help your child learn to recognise their name by:

- Writing their name down and talking about the letters (i.e.. 'This is an 'M'! Your name starts with 'M' – hear it? Mmmmax!')
- Have them practice tracing their name after you've written it in big letters
- Use fridge magnets or felt letters to practice picking the letters out and putting them in order

You can also work on some basic number skills by practicing counting in everyday situations. When taking washing off the line, for example, practicing counting how many items go in the basket or how many pegs were used.

To help build your child's alphabet and sound knowledge, try pointing out letters on signs at the shops, or talking about what letter fruit and veggies start with (i.e. 'A' is for Apple and say the sound). A fun game of eye spy can also help your child build their understanding of colours (I spy with my little eye something that is green) and letters (I spy with my little eye something that starts with the letter B)

# Practice Play Skills and Table Skills

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Sharing, turn taking (knowing when it's your go and waiting when it's not), asking others to play, and sitting at a table are important and necessary skills in both playing and learning. You can help your child practice these skills by:

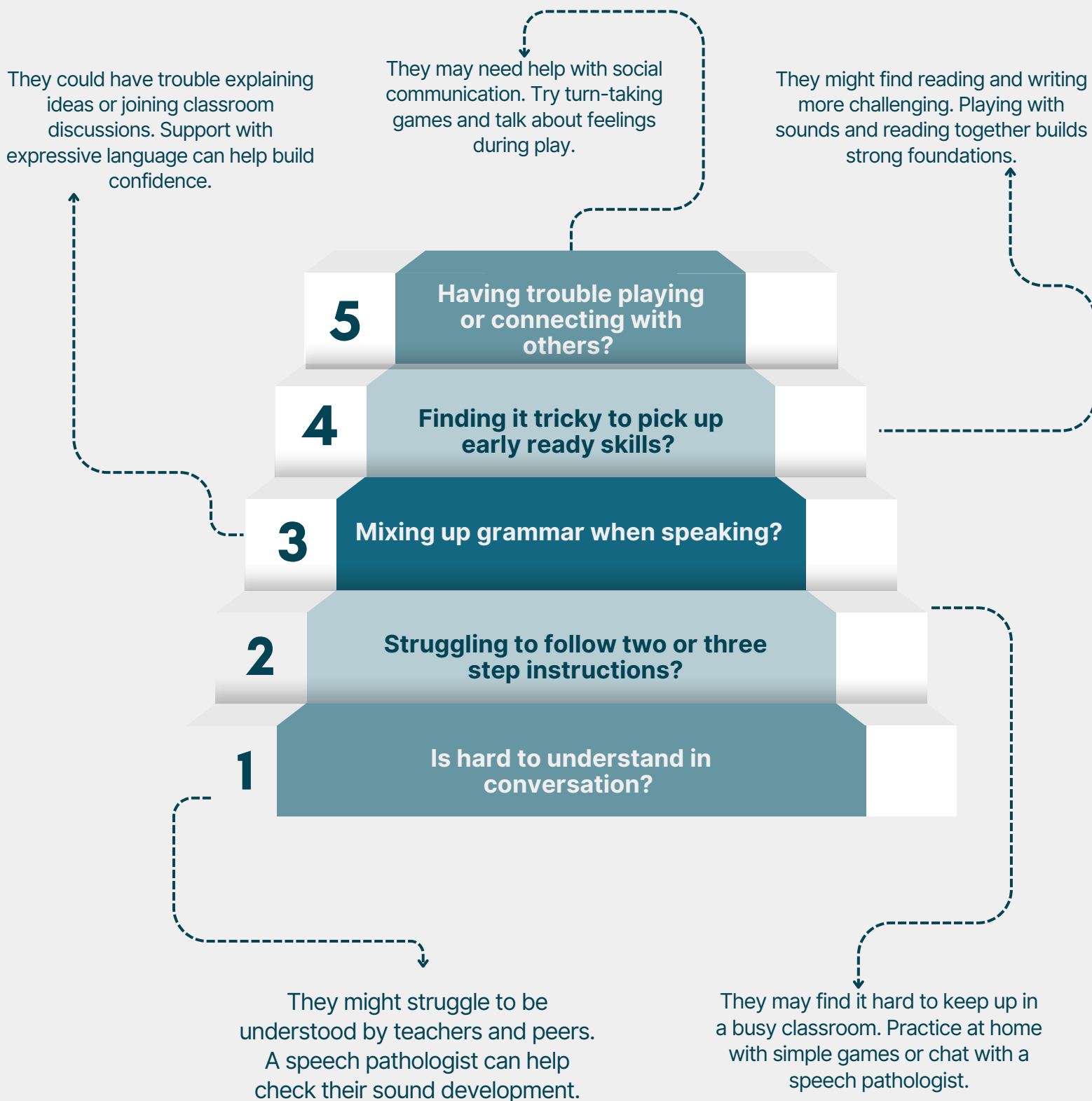
Organising playdates and practicing sharing / asking people to play

Playing card or board games at home like Go Fish, Memory, Snap, Snakes and Ladders etc, to practice taking turns, sharing, and importantly, winning and losing gracefully!

Complete some activities like book reading or card games at the table rather than on the lounge or the ground. This will help your child get used to sitting upright at a table like they are expected to at school.

# Speech Pathologist's Top Tips to Help Prepare for Kindergarten

## Have you noticed your child...



# For further information & assistance



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