

# Early Words

Language and literacy  
training initiative

## **Discovering Words**

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### Contributors to Curriculum Development

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## Objectives for the Session:

You will:

- Learn about some red flags for language disorders to help you decide whether to mention your concerns to a parent.
- Learn about some common characteristics of children with language delays (communication, behavior).
- Feel more confident talking to parents about the possibility of their child having a language delay, and suggesting where parents can access the appropriate professional assistance.
- Learn how to modify your physical setting to support children with language delays.
- Learn how to modify activities to support children with language delays.
- Learn how to support typically developing children in their interactions with children with language delays.
- Learn how to deal effectively and compassionately with the behavioral challenges often presented by children with language delays.

## Reflective Activity

Have you cared for or do you know a child with a language delay?

What are some challenges associated with having a child with a language delay in your setting? Behavior challenges? Challenges related to planning activities? Challenges related to organizing your space?

How do you think a child with a language delay feels when attempting to communicate?

What can you learn from a child with a language delay?

Notes:

## Language Milestones for Listening and Talking: Birth to 5 Years

This section is review from previous workshops, and is included so that you can refer to it throughout this workshop. It will also be helpful when you have questions about a particular child.

<b>2-4 Months</b>	Calms or smiles when spoken to Coos, laughs, makes vowel sounds
<b>4-6 Months</b>	Follows sounds with eyes, attends to music Vocal play: loud and soft sounds, high and low sounds, raspberries Babbling begins
<b>6-10 Months</b>	Plays baby games (peek-a-boo, pat-a-cake) Recognizes words for common objects Begins to respond to requests/instructions Speech like babbling with repeated syllables (e.g. “ba ba ba ba”) Imitates different speech sounds
<b>10-14 Months</b>	Can point to pictures in a book when they are named Can follow simple commands (“Wave bye-bye”) Jargon/ conversational babbling: baby babbles in long “sentences”, may sound like questions Uses one or two words that may be difficult to understand
<b>14-18 Months</b>	Points to body parts when asked Follows more complex instructions (“get your coat and shoes”) Uses some simple two-word combinations (“want milk”) or questions (“where doggie?”) Vocabulary increases to about 50 words
<b>18-36 Months</b>	Follows two-part instructions (“pick up your toy and put it in the box”) Vocabulary is increasing rapidly-around 9 words per day Has a word for most common objects Uses 3 word combinations Familiar people can understand speech well over 50% of the time

- 3-4 Years**
- Answers simple wh-questions (who, what, where, why)
  - Talks about things that happened in the recent past
  - Many sentences have 4 or more words
  - Unfamiliar listeners understand speech well over 50% of the time
- 4-5 Years**
- Can listen to a short story and answer simple questions about it
  - Understands most language directed to child
  - Can tell a story or talk on a single topic
  - Uses adult-like grammar most of the time
  - Says most speech sounds correctly (exceptions may include r, l, th)

## Red Flags for Language Delays

Because all children develop differently, it can be difficult to tell whether a child is just quiet, or a “late-bloomer”, or if the child might have a language disorder. Since this can only be diagnosed by a speech-language pathologist, remember that you don’t have to make a definite determination! Your only responsibility may be to talk to the parent, and make some suggestions regarding where to go for help. Here are some red flags-if you notice one or two of these you should probably talk to a parent.

- Does not babble using a variety of different sounds by age 9 months.  
When babies are getting ready to use words, they will often produce babbling that sounds remarkably similar to real words (ba-ba-bi, ma-mo). This should appear by 9 months. Babies with language delays may be much more quiet than other babies their age.
- Does not understand 5-10 common words (body parts, common pictures) by 12 months.  
Although it is more difficult to observe a child’s understanding of language, you can notice whether a child points to pictures you name during book reading or can play games like pointing to body parts.
- No words by age 18 months.  
There is variation from child to child but 18 months is a definite “cut-off” point for this expectation.
- Does not appear to understand simple, one-step directions by age 18 months.  
An 18 month old should be able to understand and follow directions such as “find your doll” or “get your shoes”.
- Slowed vocabulary growth.  
At around 18 -24 months, children will often begin to add words to their expressive vocabulary at a rapid rate, up to one word per day. Although this growth varies substantially from child to child, you should notice steady increases in vocabulary from 12 months onward, increasing even more rapidly by around 18-24 months.

- Fewer than 50 words by 24 months.  
First words usually appear around 9- 12 months, and steady vocabulary growth should follow. Although vocabulary size varies from child to child, a two year old should have at least 50 words.
- No word combinations by 30 months.  
Around the second birthday, simple two-word combinations will appear in the speech of typically developing children. “Want more” and “See doggie” are examples. “Thank you” is not an example, because this phrase functions as a single word.
- Obvious, consistent frustration during attempts to communicate.  
Many children with language delays want to communicate just like any individual. When they are unable to make their needs and thoughts clear, they may exhibit behavioral characteristics such as tantrums, hitting, or withdrawal. They may abandon their attempts to communicate. Careful observation usually reveals that these behaviors are connected with communicative situations.
- Lack of active communication.  
Some children with language delays do not seem interested in communicating, and will not attempt to use gestures or other means to make themselves understood. They may appear very shy, or passive, or may only attempt to communicate with a few people.
- Difficulty interacting with peers.  
Although toddlers and preschoolers may not play together consistently, they often need to negotiate over toys or other objects. This can be very difficult for children with language delays, and they may resort to physical means such as hitting, or they may avoid peer interactions altogether.
- Child is very difficult to understand compared to other children the same age.

## Talking with Parents

If you have noticed even a few of the red flags described above, you may feel that it is your responsibility to mention your concerns to a parent or primary caregiver. This can be a difficult conversation.

- Sometimes it may be difficult to decide whether your concerns are valid, and other times it will be quite obvious. If you are unsure, refer to the normal milestones chart and the list of red flags carefully to help you decide. This process will also help organize your thoughts so that you can communicate more clearly with the parent.
- Do not delay in mentioning your observations to a parent. You have experience with children, and know what to expect. Chances are your observations are accurate. Remember-you are not telling a parent “your child has a language delay”. You are simply describing some things you have noticed that are different or concerning.
- Do not be concerned that a child is too young. Children with communication delays can be treated from infancy. Early intervention gives a child the best chance of success.
- Convey your affection and concern for this child and his or her family. Parents always appreciate sincere concern.
- Set aside a time when you won't be interrupted by children or phone calls.
- Objectively describe, in clear terms, what you have noticed. Start with something positive, but do not delay in getting to the point. For example: “I have gotten to know Julia well over the past few months, and see that she has grown much more comfortable here. I do feel a little concerned about her talking. Here is what I have noticed.” Then describe your concerns, and always relate them back to typical expectations (e.g. “A three year old usually uses some word combinations. I have only heard Julia use a few single words” and give some examples). Ask if they have noticed similar things at home.

- Present some concrete options for the parents in terms of getting help. While the first stop is often the pediatrician's office, parents can also access their county Early Intervention Program, which is free. Keep this contact information close at hand. Emphasize the importance of speaking to a speech-language pathologist, a licensed professional who can screen for, diagnose and treat language delays.
- If a parent does not seem ready to hear your concerns, know that you have done your best at this point. Consider mentioning your concerns again in a month or two, perhaps asking "Have you thought any more about what we talked about?"
- Sometimes parents have heard mixed messages from various people—they may be concerned but have been told to "wait and see". This can be a dangerous approach, and parents should always know that they can access help on their own by contacting Early Intervention. Remember—there is no harm in getting an evaluation, and a parent does not need anyone's permission to access the help of a speech-language pathologist.
- Encourage parents to be persistent if necessary. They are their child's best advocate.
- Parents may have concerns about their child being "labeled". This is a valid concern, but you should also help the parents understand that if their child does indeed need help, a diagnosis must be made. Reassure the parents that such a diagnosis should not lead to lowered expectations or negative treatment. It will, however, help everyone around the child know how to offer appropriate supports.

## Characteristics of Language Delays:

Now that a child has been diagnosed-what can you expect?

Perhaps a child in your setting has recently received a diagnosis of language delay, or perhaps a new child with a language delay will be joining you. It is always helpful to know a bit about what to expect, keeping in mind that of course all children are different!

### Communication Characteristics

Obviously, it will be difficult for a child with a language delay to communicate with adults and peers. Specifically, the child may not be able to convey basic needs or desires, may be very difficult to understand, or may not understand what people are saying.

It will be important to notice exactly what aspects of communication are affected so that you can make the most useful accommodations. Here are some general possibilities:

- The child may be very quiet, and tend not to interact with anyone. Alternatively, the child may interact only with adults.
- The child may talk fairly frequently, but may be very difficult to understand.
- The child may use only single words to communicate, and may supplement these single words with gestures or pointing that may be unclear or confusing.
- The child may not understand what you or others are saying, and so may have difficulty staying on task, or keeping up with activities.

## Literacy and Children with Language Delays

Children with communication problems are at high risk for difficulty learning to read. In fact, research suggests that 60-80% of these children will have trouble with reading if they are not given appropriate early intervention and support.

In your work as a caregiver, there are two important things to remember about literacy and children with language delays. First, parents should be aware of this risk so that they can offer their child lots of literacy activities from an early age. Second, the early literacy development of children with language delays should be carefully monitored so that extra support can be offered.

In general, the same types of literacy activities that you would do with a typically developing child are also appropriate for children with language delays. You have learned about these strategies in other workshops. The following ideas may help as you implement literacy activities with children with language delays:

- Be developmentally appropriate, not age-appropriate. For example, a five year old child with a language delay may have language skills that are more typical of a four year old. In that case, you would select books and activities that are at a four year old level.
- Play to the child's strengths and interests. For example, perhaps the child is more interested in having objects named for him or her during book time, and less interested in rhyming or alphabet books. You can use the opportunity to teach the child general book knowledge, and to help them understand that printed text on a page tells about the picture. This is still a valuable literacy experience.
- Children with language delays benefit in general from more explicit, individualized attention. For example, when playing a rhyming game perhaps the typically developing children in the group are able to figure the game out without much instruction. The child with a language delay may need you to model the activity a few times as examples, and may need you to explain that "rhyming words sound the same on the end. Listen: cat... mat. They sound the same on the end".

- Parents should discuss literacy concerns with caregivers to ensure that caregivers are aware of the risk for literacy problems.
- Parents should also ask their speech-language pathologist about literacy to get specific suggestions that are appropriate for their child. These suggestions can then be shared with other caregivers.
- When the child enters kindergarten, parents should remain in close contact with the child's kindergarten teacher and should ensure that the teacher is aware of the child's language delay and of the connection between language delays and literacy development. By remaining in close contact, the parents will be aware if the child is not meeting benchmarks for literacy. The teacher can also implement any suggestions from the speech-language pathologist regarding literacy.

## Behavioral Characteristics

Imagine living in a world where you don't understand what anyone is saying, and where you are unable to communicate because no one can understand you. Think about how frustrating and scary that would be. Welcome to the world of a child with a language delay! When children are experiencing this level of frustration and fear every day, you can expect some challenging behaviors. They may include:

- The child may need to resort to physical means of communication (hitting, pushing, grabbing).
- The child may be frightened and take longer than other children to adjust to new situations, people or activities.
- There may be frequent tantrums and crying due to sheer frustration. Or, depending on the child's personality, there may be withdrawal and refusal to participate.
- Because of frequent failures to interact with peers, the child may avoid peer interactions altogether.
- The child may have difficulty sitting and listening during story time or other circle activities because he or she may not understand enough to be interested.

## Supporting the Child with Language Delays in Your Setting

Fortunately, there are many specific things you can do to support children with language delays. The good news is that you don't have to change everything about your setting—in fact you shouldn't! Your goal is to help the child succeed during daily activities and you can do this by making modifications, not changes. Think back to the other workshops you've been to, and what you learned about how to boost communication skills for all children. The same ideas are true for children with language delays. Consider the following general principles:

- Honor and respond to every attempt to communicate, even if you're not sure the child actually meant to communicate.
- Incorporate rhymes, rhythms, singing and fingerplays.
- Talk about familiar activities and objects.
- Talk about what you're doing in simple words and sentences.
- Talk about what the child is doing in simple words and sentences.
- Name objects and pictures for the child.
- Incorporate books and literacy activities into your setting as much as possible.

Now we'll spend some time on specific ideas that you can take back to work and use. In each section, there are some general principles that can be applied to a variety of settings and/or situations. For the rest of the workshop, you'll have the opportunity to learn from your peers. After each topic, there is room for you to record your ideas.

## Environmental Supports

This section relates to how you can arrange your space, and how you can move through the day.

### The Physical Environment

- Establish a quiet corner where a child can recover from a frustrating event—or just to rest (a long day of interacting can be very tiring for a child with a language delay). This should be an inviting spot with quiet books and toys and is not to be viewed as punishment or isolation.
- Keep changes to a minimum in terms of the physical arrangement.
- By having multiple sets of the same favorite toys, you can reduce opportunities for conflict.
- Offer visual supports wherever possible. For example, in addition to a “wash your hands” sign, have a picture that demonstrates hand-washing.
- Some children with language delays may have more global delays. Have developmentally appropriate toys available and don’t expect a child to necessarily be able to play with “age-appropriate” toys.

Notes:

## Schedules and Transitions

Changes can be especially hard for children with language delays. The following ideas can help them gain a sense of control over their day by knowing what to expect.

- Structure and predictability are very important. Keep the schedule of activities as consistent from day to day as you possibly can.
- If there will be a departure from the usual schedule, make sure to talk about it in advance. Good examples include field trips or visits from individuals who are not usually present. Use pictures relating to this event whenever possible.
- Picture schedules can be very helpful. For example, you can use Polaroid pictures of the usual daily activities attached to a schedule with Velcro. As each activity is completed, you or the child can remove that picture (having the child remove the pictures may foster engagement and comprehension).
- Be sure to allow enough time for transitions-don't leave the child with language delay behind.

Notes:

## Activities and Daily Interactions

For children with language delays, it is even more important to incorporate communication opportunities throughout the day, in every possible activity. Some general suggestions:

- Honor every attempt to communicate, no matter how small or confusing. Children with language delays take a big risk every time they try to communicate. Constant failures to communicate successfully are very frustrating-encouraging children to communicate regularly and really listening to them can cut down on tantrums and other evidence of frustrations.
- Use simple but grammatically correct language when talking. For example: “He jumps high” is a good example, but “He is jumping really high on the trampoline, isn’t he?” is probably too long.
- Parallel talk: talk about what the child is doing.
  - o You’re moving the car. It’s going fast!
  - o You’re mad. He took the car.
- Self talk: talk about what you’re doing (or what others are doing).
  - o I’m picking up books. I’m putting them away.
- Expand on the child’s productions by adding one or two (but no more than two!) words to his or her utterance:
  - o Child: Jump.
  - o You: He jumps.
- Pause, pause, pause. It can take a relatively long time for a child with a language delay to think of what to say, how to say it, and then actually say it. In your interactions, build in lots of pause time so the child has a chance to respond.
- Offer visual support during activities. For example, during a craft activity, have an example of the finished product available. If there is a series of instructions such as “cut, then color, then glue”, have pictures of scissors, some crayons and glue arranged in left to right order on posterboard.

- Slow the pace of activities and keep tabs on whether the child with a language delay is still engaged-often when children do not understand what is going on they will disengage.
- If you have mixed ages, you can assign an older “buddy” as a helper.
- Everyone has had the dreaded experience of being completely unable to understand what a child is trying to communicate. You can try having the child show you what they mean, or see if another child knows what they mean. If worse comes to worse and you just can’t figure it out, you can say “I’m so sorry, I’m just not sure what you are trying to say. I really want to hear, so let’s try again in a little while” and then follow through later.

Notes:

## Facilitating Peer Interactions

Peer interactions can be frustrating on both ends. The child with language delay may find him- or herself interacting with another child, who may be far less patient and understanding than an adult would be. The typically-developing child may not understand the child with language delay, may wonder why he or she is taking so long to respond, etc. Obviously, this can lead to conflicts and maybe even teasing! For children with moderate to severe language delays, this issue can be one of the most frustrating parts of the day. Here are some general principles you can use to reduce these problems:

- Be aware of when conflicts may occur and head them off before they happen. For example, if there are some very popular toys, have more than one available.
- If possible, keep a special eye on children with language delays during less structured, free play time. This can be the most difficult time for these children.
- Model appropriate interactions: “My turn.” or “May I play?”
- Use your authority to establish general turn-taking expectations.
- Try using parallel talk-this can “give words” to a child with a language delay. For example, if two children are struggling over a toy: “Oh-you’re mad. You want the truck. Maybe Tommy will share the truck. Tommy, can you share?”
- Establish early on that teasing is not acceptable. Talk about how everyone is special and that in your classroom, everyone is to be treated with respect (and then specifically explain what behaviors you are looking for).

Notes:

## Understanding and Dealing with Behavioral Challenges Associated with Language Delays

Behavior challenges can be frustrating for everyone. Many caregivers report feeling helpless and unsure of what to do to reduce these challenges. It is usually most constructive to think about why a child is acting this way—in children with language delays you will probably notice that it is usually connected in some way to communication. Once you figure out why and when a behavior is happening, it will be much easier to avoid the problem in the future. Remember how frustrated and frightened a child with a language delay may be feeling. Try asking the following questions:

1. When is the behavior happening?
2. What happened right before the behavior?
3. Notice consistencies—does this frequently happen in the same situation, at the same time of day, etc?

Here are some potential examples that you can use for practice-talk with your peers for more examples.

- A child who usually has a meltdown at the end of the day an hour or so before being picked up is probably exhausted by the day-long effort to figure out what is going on, and to make herself clear to others. What could you do to prevent this and make the end of the day easier for everyone?
- Consider a child who frequently gets into conflicts involving hitting and shoving during free play time. Why does this happen? What can you do to reduce these physical altercations?
- What about a child who prefers to play alone and rejects the advances of any other child?

Notes:

## Additional Resources

### Books:

Apel, K. & Masterson, J. (2001). Beyond Baby Talk: From Sounds to Sentences-A Parent's Complete Guide to Language Development. Prima Publishing.

Manolson, Ayala (1992). It Takes Two To Talk: A Parent's Guide to Helping Children Communicate. Hanen Centre.

Weitsman, Elaine & Weist, A. (1992). Learning language and loving it: A Guide to Promoting Children's Social and Language Development in Early Childhood Settings. Hanen Centre.

Hamaguchi, Patricia. (1995). Childhood Speech, Language & Listening Problems: What Every Parent Should Know. John Wiley & Sons.

### Organizations:

American Speech-Language-Hearing Association ([www.asha.org](http://www.asha.org); 1-800-638-8255)  
Provides fact sheets in communication development and disorders and information on finding a nationally certified speech-language pathologist

Oregon Speech-Language-Hearing Association  
Referral source for state-licensed, nationally certified speech-language pathologist

Washington Speech-Language-Hearing Association  
Referral source for state-licensed, nationally certified speech-language pathologist

### Websites:

National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders ([www.nidcd.nih.gov](http://www.nidcd.nih.gov))

NICHCY ([www.nichcy.org](http://www.nichcy.org))

KidsHealth ([www.kidshealth.org](http://www.kidshealth.org))