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Speech and Language Development, Age 3 to 5 Years

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Speech and language development milestones relate to receptive language (the ability to understand words and sounds) and expressive language (the ability to use speech and gestures to communicate meaning).

A child's speech and language development becomes more advanced beginning around age 3 through age 5. Receptive language skills during this period become more sophisticated; a child learns to make subtle distinctions between objects and relationships. Also, the child can understand multi-step requests. Most children also gradually speak more fluently and use proper grammar more consistently.

Speech and language milestones

	Receptive language	Expressive language
3-year-olds:	<p>Follow two-part requests, such as "put your pajamas in the hamper and your slippers in the closet."</p> <p>Learn new words quickly; know most common object names.</p> <p>Understand the concept of "two."</p> <p>Understand gender differences.</p> <p>Know their own full name.</p>	<p>Begin correctly using plurals, pronouns, and prepositions more consistently.</p> <p>Frequently ask "why" and "what."</p> <p>Often use complete sentences of 3 to 4 words.</p>
4-year-olds:	<p>Know the names of colors.</p> <p>Understand the difference between things that are the same and things that are different, such as the difference between children and grown-ups.</p> <p>Can follow three-step instructions, such as "Go to the sink, wash your hands, and dry them on the towel."</p>	<p>Use the past tense of words.</p> <p>Use sentences of 5 to 6 words.</p> <p>Can describe something that has happened to them or tell a short story.</p> <p>Can speak clearly enough to be intelligible to strangers almost all of the time.¹</p>
5-year-olds:	<p>Understand relationships between objects, such as "the girl who is playing ball" and "the boy who is jumping rope."</p>	<p>Usually can carry on a conversation with another person.</p> <p>Often call people (or objects) by their relationship to others, such as "Bobby's mom" instead of "Mrs. Smith."</p> <p>Can define words such as "spoon" and "cat."</p>

Citations

1. Shonkoff JP (2003). Language delay: Late talking to communication disorder. In CD Rudolph, AM Rudolph, eds., Rudolph's Pediatrics, 21st ed., pp. 441–444. New York: McGraw-Hill.

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