



How to talk with your preschooler

3-5 Years

Introduction

Here are some guidelines to help you check your child's speech and language development. You will also find some ways that you can stimulate your child's speech and language at different ages.

From 3 to 3 ½ years of age most preschoolers will:

- Follow directions that have two parts, e.g. "Find the ball and bring it to Mommy".
- Understand words such as "big" and "small", "happy" and "sad", and "clean" and "dirty".
- Use three to five word sentences.
- Be understood by everyone most of the time even though they may still have trouble pronouncing some words.

What you can do to help your preschooler communicate:

- Talk about the things you see, hear and do every day. Use correct grammar and keep the words and sentences simple.
- Talk about the steps we follow to do a job. Show your child activities that happen in a certain order, e.g. making peanut butter sandwiches or getting dressed.
- Look at books with simple stories and interesting pictures. Use lots of expression in your voice and on your face as you read. Point out the objects in the book and talk with your child about them, e.g. "Look at the big cup" or "The man is skipping".
- Let your child tell you stories in their own words. Listen patiently without correcting or interrupting your child.

From 3 ½ to 4 years of age most preschoolers will:

- Understand words such as “on”, “under”, and “behind”.
- Understand “where” and “when” questions, e.g. “Where do you sleep?”
- Be able to retell a simple story with words and some gestures.
- Ask “where”, “what”, “why” and “how” questions.
- Recite a nursery rhyme or sing a song.
- Tell other people about what they have done and make themselves understood.

What you can do to help your preschooler communicate:

- Sing songs, act out nursery rhymes, do finger plays and play “make believe”.
- Play with toys and games where you take turns hiding and finding objects “in”, “on”, “under”, “behind” and “beside” other objects.
- Listen to your child and comment on what they tell you. Use phrases such as “Tell me more”, “And then what happened?” and “Tell me about it” to encourage more talking.
- Ask questions that require longer answers such as “What did you and Daddy do?” instead of “Did you and Daddy fix the car?”
- Listen for, name and talk about sounds you hear, e.g. telephones, birds, doorbells, animals, and people talking.

From 4 to 5 years of age most preschoolers will:

- Use sentences of 4 to 8 words most of the time.
- Be able to tell about things they saw, did and felt.
- Speak clearly enough that most people can understand at least 90 per cent of what is said. There may still be some difficulties with pronouncing the r, l, s, z, th, sh, j, y and ch sounds correctly.
- Understand words about time (before/after), speed (fast/slow), places (out/over/above) and some numbers and colours.

What you can do to help your preschooler communicate:

- Take your child to new places and name the new people, places and things you see. Talk about and explain what is happening.
- Let your child play with other children their own age. Preschoolers learn a lot from each other.
- Read books about new and different things. Let your child help pick out books and take part in telling the story.
- Talk about the day’s events with your child. Take turns discussing what you did, saw, liked and disliked. Help your child better understand feelings by using feeling words that go with the event, e.g. “surprised”, “frustrated”, “angry”, “happy”, “pleased”, “disappointed” or “sad”.
- Show your child how to use better sentences by rephrasing what they say. For example, if they say, “He falled down and hurted hissself” you can say “Yes, he fell down and hurt himself”.

Stuttering

Many children between the ages of two and five years of age will repeat sounds or words. For example, “I...I...I...want to go out out side.” This is usually quite normal, as young children are still learning how to put words together to express themselves.

They often do not know how to speak smoothly, so they repeat sounds or words, pause, back up and hold onto sounds. Avoid labeling this as “stuttering”. This will only make the child feel self-conscious and bad about talking. You can help by listening to what your child is talking about rather than how they are saying it.

If you are concerned about your child’s speech and language development, or would like more information, please contact the speech-language pathologist or public health office in your region.