

Late talkers: Toddlers who are late to talk

About Late Talkers

Learning to talk is a significant milestone in children's development. A child's ability to communicate and understand in the first few years of life will impact their readiness for school, ability to learn to read and make friends.

Late talkers include toddlers who are late to begin talking and using words with no known cause (such as an intellectual disability or autism). Some children who are not saying words also have difficulty with understanding words, sentences, and following instructions.

Impact on communication

A toddler who is late to begin talking may reach the age of two and be using less than 50 words or only using a small number of word combinations to communicate.

Helping children who are late reaching their early communication milestones is important as it may impact:

- The toddler's ability to get their message across which can cause frustration
- Response to simple questions
- Early play skills
- The ability to follow basic instructions such as "Give me the ball"
- Early production of sounds (such as the "s" in "sip")
- Gesture use (such as pointing)

Getting help for your child

Most children learn to talk without any direct teaching. However, some children will need additional support through a speech pathologist. We know that some children will "catch up" to their peers before they start school, but some children will go on to have persisting language difficulties. Identifying which toddlers may have ongoing communication problems can be difficult, so it is important to seek professional opinion early rather than adopting a wait-and-see approach. If you are concerned:

- See a speech pathologist: A speech pathologist can work with parents/caregivers to help support their child develop their understanding and use of vocabulary and grammar.

- See your General Practitioner (GP): Your regular GP may be able to provide some information or advice. They may also recommend getting your child's hearing tested and check your child's overall health and medical history.
- See the Maternal and Child Health Nurse (MCHN): Your local MCHN can be a great source of information about your child's communication and milestones.

Helping children who are late to begin talking is also important because it may impact their later ability to:

- Understand and follow instructions
- Express themselves using the correct words and grammar
- Have the school readiness skills to support learning
- Learn to read, write, and spell when they begin school

What you can do to help

While you are waiting to see a speech pathologist:

- Read to your child regularly: read different stories, comment on the pictures and use gesture to emphasise the meaning of words. See Speech Pathology Australia's information about the Book of the Year Awards: [Book of the Year \(speechpathologyaustralia.org.au\)](http://speechpathologyaustralia.org.au)
- Get down to your child's level and follow their lead: describe the actions made by your child during play (e.g., "going up", "feeding ted").
- Encourage play: engage in play with your child to provide opportunity to model language and talk about what both you and your child are doing.

Early communication development is important for long-term learning and social outcomes. Seeking support early for concerns about your child's late talking or understanding can assist in improving their communication ability.

Find out more

Information for parents and professionals, The Hanen Centre: <http://www.hanen.org/Helpful-Info/Articles.aspx>

Late Language Emergence, American Association of Speech and Hearing (ASHA): <https://www.asha.org/practice-portal/clinical-topics/late-language-emergence/>

Waiting for Speech Pathology, NSW Health: <https://wnswlhd.health.nsw.gov.au/our-services/speech-pathology/>