



Learning words is hard for young children

It's a sunny day and you're taking your baby for a walk in the park. As you stop to rest, you see a friend with her 18-month-old grandson who's pointing excitedly at a poster on the side of a bus. He clearly wants to tell you something.

"Ook," he says, "wabbit!"

"Yes," his grandmother says. "Isn't that a cute white rabbit?"

"Waaaabbit!" he shouts, looking at the picture with a delighted smile on his face. Suddenly, he begins waving at something in the air. "Bafai!"

"Barfly? Did he just say barfly?" you ask.

"No," his grandmother tells you as she laughs, "He said butterfly!"

It seems like he's learning new words every day."



Talking with an 18-month-old is hard for those who don't speak toddler language! Some words toddlers say sound just right. Others don't seem very close to real words. Children learn the sounds of their language over several years, and some sounds seem harder to learn than others. Before the age of about seven years, it's normal for children not to have all the right sounds in the right spots when they speak. Remember that all children are different, and each child's development may not match this exactly.

What did he say?

The time when young children are able to pronounce all the sounds in English can vary by months or years. Certain sounds are easier for some children than for others. As you can see below, English-speaking children usually start babbling with the sounds "m" (mama), "b" (baba) and "d" (dada).

But don't expect to hear perfect "l" and "r" sounds right away. Other sounds like "j" and "z" may get better and better up to age eight. Combinations of sounds can also be a challenge, so you might hear "goggie" or "doddie" instead of "doggie," or "cacka" instead of "cracker."

Here's a general range showing when most children are able to say different sounds in English: one to three years old—p, m, h, n, w, b; two to four years old—k, g, d, t, ng, f, y; three to six years old—r, l; and three to eight years old—s, ch, sh, z, j, v (Sander, 1972).

Keep Talking!

Rhymes and songs help children
learn the sounds of words



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Putting sounds and words together

Adults know that words are like puzzles, made up of many individual sounds that need to fit together. But children learning to speak don't know how some sounds fit together to make words, and they don't yet know all the pieces (Menn & Stoel-Gammon, 1995). For example, some children hear the word "truck" and hear a "ch" sound at the beginning. If you close your eyes and listen carefully while you say "truck" and "chuck" to yourself, you'll hear how much alike they are.

For the first few months after they begin talking, young children hear words as bigger groups of sounds. They might even think of a word or a phrase as just one big sound. For example, children might try repeating whole syllables or phrases at once, like "Ahhwa!" for "I want it!"

Even when children hear all the parts of a word correctly, it can still be difficult to say them. It can be even more difficult to put them together in the right order. For example, "daddy" and "egg" may be easy for a child to say, while "doggie" could be hard. Daddy uses the "d" sound and "egg" uses the "g" sound, so why would "doggie" be hard?

For a young child, putting these sounds together is a big challenge. Learning to put sounds together takes concentration and practice (Menn & Stoel-Gammon, 1995).

Speech in stages

Sometime around 18 months, a big change occurs. Young children start to recognize familiar sounds and sound patterns quickly when they hear them, and they begin to piece these familiar sounds together like puzzle pieces to form new words. This helps children learn to say new words after hearing them only once or twice (Schwartz, 1983).

By the time they are three to four years old, children can say more and more sounds correctly. Between the ages of four and seven years, they can make most of the sounds in English as well as adults. They also begin to use longer words with more syllables. They even learn some rules of grammar and talk about things in the past and the future correctly. And they begin to appreciate how fun language can be (Schwartz, 1983)!

By the time they reach seven years old, most children know thousands of words and can speak quite clearly (Schwartz, 1983). But make no mistake, they're still learning! Knowing the sounds of language helps them learn to read, and they continue to improve their grammar. Before long you might find that the simple talks you used to have about "wabbits" have turned into hour-long conversations!



Building vocabulary every day

No two children develop on the same schedule. These stages of speech development and the ages listed in this Spotlight are guidelines and not rules. Also, the development of sounds described here are for children learning English. Children speaking other languages may develop differently.

Helpful parenting tips

- ★ Right from birth talk to your child a lot! This helps her to connect with you and get her started on the path to learning language.
- ★ Before your baby can talk, play sound games with her. If she babbles, babble back!
- ★ Don't expect perfect speech from your toddler...or even your seven-year-old. Learning how to make sounds correctly takes time.
- ★ If you think she might be trying to say a real word, say it for her, and see if she agrees that you've got the right one. Younger children may know the word before they can say it. If he mispronounces a word like "wabbit", don't criticize him. Just say the word correctly, "Yes, that's a rabbit."
- ★ To help build vocabulary, describe objects with lots of details. But use short sentences! And don't add too many new words all at once. For example, if your child says "Car car". You could say "Yes, that's a blue car! And look, it has black wheels."
- ★ Reading to your child can expose him to a wide range of sounds and words. Find books that you both think are fun, and stop before your child gets bored.
- ★ If you're concerned that your child has difficulty with speech, talk to your child's health care provider.
- ★ Help your child to hear and say the sounds of language by reading books together, singing songs, and learning playful nursery rhymes. After all, there are few experiences more fun than talking with a child and hearing them use new words and sentences.

**For more information on parenting and early learning,
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