

# YOUR PRESCHOOLER'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT

From babbling as a baby, your child's language has made amazing strides. Perhaps nothing else makes your child feel as great as when he is able to get across to you the ideas he wants to express. How does your child's language grow?

## THREE-YEAR-OLDS:

Threes like that they can get reactions with their speech. They know that through their speech, they can influence others. Language shapes the way they understand the world as well as their own thoughts. Words give a three-year old power. Threes learn language in such a rapid burst that it becomes a "touchpoint" for them, often upsetting their routine and making some of their development regress for a short time.

Parents give threes the feedback they want when they repeat their words back to them:

Tommy: *"Shoes on."*

Daddy: *"Shall we put your shoes on?"*

Tommy (beaming!): *"Yes. Shoes on!"*

Most threes begin to use sentences of three-five words. Threes use plurals and are beginning to use pronouns. They follow simple directions. Threes ask continual questions-mostly Who? What? When? Why? and How? questions-and are pretty good at expressing their basic needs: *"I'm hungry."* Threes usually speak about 900 words and most threes can be understood somewhat by adults besides their own parents.

### Stuttering

Many three-year olds go through a period of time in which they stutter or stammer, especially at the beginning of a sentence: *"I-I-I-I want a drink."*

Parents worry that this stuttering is a sign of a real speech problem, but it almost never is. This stuttering is simply a result of the child's ability to **think** faster than he can **talk**. The problem will go away as he gains speech fluency. In the meantime, parents should not make a big deal out of it, and should say as little as possible about it. It probably isn't necessary to have a child assessed by a speech pathologist for this problem at this age.

Some children are so frustrated by this stuttering that it leads to tantrums. If your child is struggling to get words out, your calm reassurance and patience to listen as long as it takes will help him get a handle on his frustration.

## FOUR-YEAR-OLDS:

A four-year old's speech is better able to keep up with his ideas. Fours can put more complex ideas across. This helps them feel in control. Most fours have a vocabulary of about 1500 words and can use them in sentences as long as eight words. Fours make fewer grammatical errors in their speech. They can retell stories they have heard, and can even make up stories of their own. They like to sing and brag and sometimes call other children names.

Fours often still struggle with a few speech sounds. A few which are especially difficult are "f," "v," "s" and "z." These sounds usually come when a child is five. The sounds made by "sh," "l," "r" and "th" may take even a little longer.

If a child is unable to speak to be understood at four, there are social implications. A four-year old who cannot communicate with friends will face a social challenge. For this reason, the assistance of a speech pathologist should be sought.

## FIVE-YEAR-OLDS

Five-year olds speak between 2000 and 2500 words. They love to tell and listen to stories. They ask complex, thoughtful questions. They recognize many letters and even know the corresponding sounds of a few of them. They understand position words like "over," "under," "before" and "after."

Fives are starting to hold a pencil in a more adult way and write. Letter reversal and "inventive" spelling is normal and should not alarm parents at this age. They are both part of the child's exploration with writing, and will straighten themselves out as she begins writing instruction in school.



## BOOKS AND READING

In every study conducted, children who are read to in their early years experience greater language development than children who have not experienced reading. In her book, Babies Need Books, (1998), Dorothy Butler writes,

*"There is clear evidence that babies and small children profit from an environment in which language is used creatively, to examine ideas, relate occurrences, and describe shades of meaning. A truth that is still overlooked, or at least undervalued, is that what a child understands is actually much more important than what that child can express at a given time...(In books, language) flows around them, rich in content and imagery. From it, and using it, children construct their own view of the world. At no stage can they use, aloud, all the language they understand. Their speech lags, inadequate to their insights."*

~ Dorothy Butler,  
Babies Need Books

When children hear the rich language in books, they build understanding that exceeds their knowledge of each separate word. They get a sense of language and conversation, of sentence structure and dialogue. They hear models for language that they would never hear from other children in the sand box.

Every young child should have some books of her own, preferably on her own small bookshelf. Threes will love books with illustrations that reach out to them, and rhythmic language that soothes and reassures them. With fours, you can begin to talk about the book itself, using words like "author" and "illustrator" and lovingly handling the book. Fives should be able to begin to listen to stories that have no illustrations at all, but be able to rely on the pictures they create in their own minds from the listening.

Reading many times a day and in small periods is a good rule of thumb for preschoolers. Read before leaving the house in the morning, read in the car, read before naps, read before bed, read while waiting to see the doctor, read when there's nobody to play with and nothing to do. Turning to books will teach your child to take advantage for learning throughout his day, and will keep him from ever feeling bored.

Remember that a good book is a good book at any age, and feel free to follow your child's preferences. If she wants the same book read again and again, realize there must be a reason why. Be as patient as you can be!