

## Language Development

Infants' first means of verbal communication is crying. Crying as a biologic sign conveys a message of urgency and signals displeasure, such as hunger. However, crying is also a social event that affects the development of the parent–infant relationship—either by its absence, which usually has a positive effect on parents, or by its presence, which may evoke a negative response or persuade parents to minister to the child's physical or emotional needs.

In the first few weeks of life, crying has a reflexive quality and is mostly related to physiologic needs. Infants cry for 1 to 1.5 hours a day up to 3 weeks old and then build up to 2 to 4 hours by 6 weeks old. Crying tends to decrease by 12 weeks old. It is thought that the increase in crying for no apparent reason during the first few months may be related to the discharge of energy and the maturational changes in the central nervous system. At the end of the first year, infants cry for attention; from fear (especially stranger fear); and from frustration, usually in response to their developing but inadequate motor skills.

Vocalizations heard during crying eventually become syllables and words (e.g., the “mama” heard during vigorous crying). Infants vocalize as early as 5 to 6 weeks old by making small throaty sounds. By 2 months old, they make single vowel sounds, such as *ah*, *eh*, and *uh*. By 3 to 4 months old, the consonants *n*, *k*, *g*, *p*, and *b* are added, and infants coo, gurgle, and laugh aloud. By 6 months old, they imitate sounds; add the consonants *t*, *d*, and *w*; and combine syllables (e.g., “dada”), but they do not ascribe meaning to the word until 10 to 11 months old. By 9 to 10 months old, they comprehend the meaning of the word “no” and obey simple commands. By 1 year old, they can say 3 to 5 words with meaning and may understand as many as 100 words. Because language development is based on expressive skills (ability to make thoughts, ideas, and desires known to others) and receptive skills (ability to understand the words being spoken), it is important that infants are exposed to expressive speech and that infants with delays in achieving milestones are carefully evaluated for potential hearing loss (see [Universal Newborn Hearing Screening, Chapter 7](#)).

## Play