



Language Development: 8 to 12 Months

Toward the end of the first year, your baby will begin to communicate what she wants by pointing, crawling, or gesturing toward her target. She'll also imitate many of the gestures she sees adults make as they talk. This nonverbal communication is only a temporary measure, however, while she learns how to phrase her messages in words.



Do you notice the coos, gurgles, and screeches of earlier months now giving way to recognizable syllables, such as "ba," "da," "ga," and "ma"? Your child may even stumble on words such as "mama" and "bye-bye" quite accidentally, and when you get excited she'll realize she's said something meaningful. Before long she'll start using "mama" to summon you or attract your attention. At this age, she may also say "mama" throughout the day just to practice saying the word. Ultimately, however, she'll use words only when she wants to communicate their meanings.

Even though you've been talking to your baby from birth, she now understands more language, and thus your conversations will take on new significance. Before she can say many, if any, words, she'll probably be comprehending more than you suspect. For example, watch how she responds when you mention a favorite toy across the room. If she looks toward it, she's telling you she understands. To help her increase her understanding, keep talking to her as much as possible. Tell her what's happening around her, particularly as you bathe, change, and feed her. Make your language simple and specific: "I'm drying you with the big blue towel. How soft it feels!" Verbally label familiar toys and objects for her, and try to be as consistent as possible—that is, if you call the family pet a cat today, don't call it a kitty tomorrow.

Picture books can enhance this entire process by reinforcing her budding understanding that everything has a name. Choose books with large board, cloth, or vinyl pages that she can turn herself. Also look for simple but colorful illustrations of things your child will recognize.

Whether you're reading or talking to her, give her plenty of opportunities to join in. Ask questions and wait for a response. Or let her take the lead. If she says "Gaagaagaa," repeat it back and see what she does. Yes, these exchanges may seem meaningless, but they tell your baby that communication is two-way and that she's a welcome participant. Paying attention to what she says also will help you identify the words she understands and make it more likely that you'll recognize her first spoken words.

These first words, incidentally, often aren't proper English. For your child, a "word" is any sound that consistently refers to the same person, object, or event. So if she says "mog" every time she wants milk, you should treat "mog" with all the respect of a legitimate word. When you speak back to her, however, use "milk," and eventually she'll make the correction herself.

There's a tremendous variance in the age at which children begin to say recognizable words. Some have a vocabulary of two to three words by their first birthday. More likely, your baby's speech at twelve months will consist of a sort of gibberish that has the tones and variations of intelligible speech. As long as she's experimenting with sounds that vary in intensity, pitch, and quality, she's getting ready to talk. The more you respond to her as if she were speaking, the more you'll stimulate her urge to communicate.

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