A FEW FACTS ABOUT CHILDREN'S LANGUAGE SKILLS
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In general:

By the age of 3, most children of normal development can string words together in generally correct order, and can use language in a conversationally appropriate way. Their vocabulary can range from about 500 to 3,000 words. They can identify over five parts of their own bodies.

By age 5-6, the basic language structures of most children are well established, although far from fully mature. They can define SOME simple words. They can accurately name 3-4 colors. With a receptive vocabulary generally estimated at around 14,000 words, their language sounds on the surface much like an adult's.

This misleading surface similarity of language does not mean, however, that these children have achieved mastery of their language. Later acquisitions include (but are not limited to) the ability to handle 1) complex sentences containing relative (e.g., who, which, that) or adverbial (e.g., when, before, after, while) clauses; 2) some critical verb structures like many passives; 3) complex negation, and 4) complex structural distinctions such as those between ask and tell, know and think, easy to (see/please/etc) and eager to (see, etc) and some syntactic aspects of the verb "promise"-- that is, the way we use the word (not the concept of) "promise" in a sentence.

Nor does the apparent similarity mean that children this age have mastered all those concepts expressed in language, such as age, time, speed, size, duration and number: (How old is she? When did it happen?, How fast was the car going?, How big was the knife?, How long did it last? How many times did it happen?) They do not fully understand the family relationships expressed by kinship terms such as parents, aunt, grandfather, cousin. While recent empirical research with abused children indicates an understanding of the concepts of truth/lie by at least age 5, the ability to express or define that knowledge (What is truth?) develops much later.

By age 10-11, most children of normal development have acquired the ability to use most of these relational words in an adult fashion.

What follows is a list of a few features of language that children acquire from about the age of 2 to 10. Keep in mind that all of these data are for native speakers of English. Children (and adults too) who have English as a second language may lag far behind the acquisition ranges given here, so special care must be taken in talking with, and listening to them. There is one other caveat to add: not all studies of children's acquisition are comparable. Some follow only a few children over a long period of time, others observe larger groups of children in shorter bursts of time. Most studies to date are of white, middle-class children. The result is that scholars often disagree as to actual acquisition ages. There is, however, a middle ground, and that is what is represented on the next two pages.

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A Few Facts about Children's Language Skills (cont'd)

Specific lexical skills:
    Feature   Age*

Adjectives
    Comparatives (e.g., more, bigger, but not deeper, wider, earlier, later) . . . . 4 - 5
    Superlatives (e.g., most, biggest) . . . . 3 - 6
    Ability to make complex comparisons in response to Q's
    (e.g., Which box is taller than it is fat?) . . . . 6 - 8
Articles
    Full mastery of contrast between 'the' and 'a' . . . . about 8
Adverbs
    Reliable distinction between 'before'/'after' (which are also prepositions/conjunctions) . . . 7+
    'Frontwards', 'sidewards', 'backwards' . . . . about 7
Prepositions
    In, on (generally the first two acquired) . . . . 1-1/2 to 2-1/2
    Off, out (of), away (from) . . . . 2 to 3
    Toward, up . . . . .3 to 3-1/2
    In front of, next to, around . . . . 3-1/2 to 4
    Beside . . . . 4 to 4-1/2
    Down . . . . 4-1/2 to 5
    Ahead of, behind . . . . 4-1/2 to 5-1/2
Pronouns
    Possessives:
      My, your, mine, his . . . . by age 3-1/2
      Their, her(s), his, its, our(s) . . . . 3 - 5
    Deictic ("Pointing") pronouns "this" v. "that" (when no fixed referent is available) . . . . . 7+
    Reliable matching of a pronoun to a following noun (e.g., he...John) . . . . about 10

Verb contrast between come-go; bring-take . . . . 7 - 8+
    between tell-ask. . . . . .7 - 8

WH questions (WHat, WHere, WHo, WHy, How, WHen)
    Appear in child's speech (in approximately above order) . . . . from 2-1/2 to 4-1/2
    Appropriate grammatical response to WH Q's acquired . . . . by age 5-1/2
    Appropriate cognitive response to WHy, How, WHen . . . . by about age 10

Syntactic Skills:
Passives: with action verbs (e.g., hit, push: Were you hit) . . . . .5+
    with all verbs, including non-action (e.g., Were you liked by) . . . . .7 - 13+
    (earliest form of passive is the agentless "Get" passives (e.g., I got hit)
"Tag" questions (e.g., Xxx, isn't it? tag underlined), produced at about age . . . . 4+
    Combined with negatives in the assertion, (e.g., That's not what she said; isn't that
    so?/is that not so?) is confusing on into adulthood.

Few Facts about Children's Language Skills (cont'd)

Feature	Age*
Conversational skills:	
Turn-taking: from first use to mastery	before age 2 to 6+
Asking contingent questions:	by age 3

        (Contingent questions relate to the immediately prior utterance; e.g., questions which indicate that something just said is not fully understood, such as "What did you say?")

Ability to report the basic elements of typical events (such as what happens at a birthday party) . . . 3
Ability to describe, narrate, and inform in adult-satisfactory way . . . . May still be developing
        in Jr and Sr High School years

*The ages given here represent approximations only of the time when each feature is fully and reliably acquired -- meaning that the child can both comprehend and produce the feature. Children reach different stages, of course, at individual times that can vary widely. Some research indicates that acquisition of these features is also apparently retarded by as much as 12-18 months if child has been abused.

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8. With children, redundancy in questions is a useful thing. Repeat names and places often instead of using strings of (often ambiguous) pronouns. Avoid unanchored "that"'s, and "there"'s. Give verbs all of their appropriate nouns (subjects and objects), as in "[I want you to] Promise *me* that *you* will tell *me* the truth," instead of "Promise me to tell the truth." "Will" is an important word in that instruction, since many young children regard "will" as placing a stronger obligation on them than "promise." So use both together.

9. Watch your pronouns carefully (including "that"). Be sure they refer either to something you can physically point at, or to something in the very immediate (spoken) past, such as in the same sentence, or in the last few seconds.

10. In a related caution, be very careful about words whose meanings depend on their relation to the speaker and the immediate situation, such as personal pronouns (I, you, we), locatives (here, there), objects (this, that), and verbs of motion (come/go; bring/take).

11. Avoid tag questions (e.g., "You did it, <u>didn't you</u>?"). They are confusing to children. Avoid, too, Yes/No questions that are packed with lots of propositions. (Example of a bad simple-sounding question, with propositions numbered: "[1] Do you remember [2] when Mary asked you [3] if you knew [4] what color Mark's shirt was, and [5] you said, [6] 'Blue'?" What would a "Yes" or "No" answer tell you here?) It does not help the factfinder to rely on an answer if it's not clear what the question was.

12. See that the child stays firmly grounded in the appropriate questioning situation. If you are asking about the past, be sure the child understands that. If you shift to the present, make that clear too. If it's necessary to have the child recall a specific time/date/place in which an event occurred, keep reminding the child of the context of the questions. And avoid phrases like, "Let me direct your attention to." Try instead, "I want you to think about/I'm going to ask you some questions about...."

13. Explain to children why they are being asked the same questions more than once by more than one person. Repeated questioning is often interpreted (by adults as well as by children) to mean that the first answer was the wrong answer, or wasn't the answer that was desired.

14. Be alert to the tendency of young children to be very literal and concrete in their language. "Did you have your <u>clothes</u> on?" might get a "No" answer; "Did you have your <u>p.j.'s</u> on?" might get a "Yes."

15. Don't <u>expect</u> children under about age 9 or 10 to give "reliable" estimates of time, speed, distance, size, height, weight, color, or to have mastered any relational concept, including kinship. (Adults' ability to give many of these estimates is vastly overrated.)

16. Do not tell a child, "Just answer my question(s) yes or no." With their literal view of language, children can interpret this to mean that only a Yes or a No answer (or even "Yes or No"!) is permitted -- period, whether or not such answers are appropriate. Under such an interpretation, children might think that answers like "I don't know/remember," and lawfully permitted explanations would be forbidden.

2

Some Basic Sentence-building Principles
For Talking to Children
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1.   Vocabulary

- Use words that are short (1-2 syllables) and common.
    Ex: "house" instead of "residence"
- Translate difficult words into easy phrases.
    Ex: "what happened to you" instead of "what you experienced"
- Use proper names and places instead of pronouns.
    Ex: "what did Marcy" do? instead of "what did she do?"; "in the house"
    instead of "in there"
- Use concrete, visualizable nouns ("back yard") instead of abstract ones ("area").
- Use verbs that are action-oriented.
    Ex: "point to," "tell me about," instead of "describe"
- Substitute simple, short verb forms for multi-word phrases when possible.
    Ex: "if you *went*" instead of "if you *were to have gone*"
- Use active voice for verbs instead of the passive.
    Ex: "Did you see a doctor?" instead of "Were you seen by a doctor?"
    [Note: One exception: the passive "get" ("Did you get hurt?"), which
    children acquire very early, and is easier to process than "Were you
    hurt?"]

2. Putting the words together

- Aim for one main idea per question/sentence.
- When combining ideas, introduce no more than one new idea at a time.
- Avoid interrupting an idea with a descriptive phrase. Put the phrase (known as a
    relative clause) at the end of the idea instead.
    Ex: "Please tell me about the man who had the red hat on."
    instead of "The man who had the red hat on is the one I'd like you to tell me
    about."
- Avoid difficult-to-process connectives like "while" and "during."
- Avoid negatives whenever possible.
- Avoid questions that give a child only 2 choices. Add an open-end choice at the
    end. Ex: "Was the hat red, or blue, or some other color?"

BOTTOM LINE: SHORT AND SIMPLE IS GOOD.

First Steps in Maximizing Children's Ability to Give a More Complete, Accurate Report
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After introducing self to child (if necessary), and telling what your job is:

1. ALWAYS begin interview with rapport building, open-ended invitations to talk about neutral subjects.
   Exs: "I'd like to get to know you a little bit", followed by: "Like, what you do in the morning at your house?" or "What do you do that's fun?" or "Tell me whatever you want to, just about you."
   > **Advantage:** interviews that begin with rapport-building by using open-ended questions or invitations (tell me about) get more details about the target event (alleged incident), even with 3-4 year olds.

2. INCLUDE an invitation to talk that gives the child a chance to provide a chronological narrative.
   Ex: "So what did you do just before you came here? Please tell me everything you can remember, from the beginning to the end."
   > **Advantage:** Although this is NOT reliable (maybe what you are asking about is unimportant to the child, so there is no motivation to respond with a lot of details), you may get a sense of how well (by adult standards) the child can report an event.

3. PAY ATTENTION to the child's language capabilities as you and she/he talk. Is child very verbal? Have good vocabulary? Does the child use lots of nouns, or does he/she rely mostly on pronouns? Are the pronouns correct? Are sentences short, long? If they are long, how are they put together: with "and", "and then", "because" (incorrectly); or does the child include connectives such as "while", "during", "usually", "because" (correctly), "so", "if"? The latter uses indicate a much more advanced capability to produce complex utterances. Caution still must be taken, however, in YOUR using complex questions and statements.
   > **Advantage:** Gives you an idea about how you should adjust your way of talking so that you and the child can communicate more accurately.

4. PRACTICE with child on ways to help YOU get things right: telling you that you made a mistake, saying I don't know (if true), telling you he/she doesn't understand what you said/asked.
   > **Advantage:** Increases accuracy of responses; reduces suggestibility.

5. MOVE INTO the central event with another open-ended question. Some interviewers use something like, "Well, ___, why do you think you are here today?" Others (very successfully), use: "I understand something may have happened to you (yesterday, a while ago). Please tell me about that."
   > **Advantage:** Avoids a leading introduction to the event.

6. NEVER move quickly from one question to the other, especially if you have paraphrased a response. Paraphrases can be incorrect (using "in" for "on", "privates" for "private"), and without a chance to absorb what you have said, the opportunity for a child to correct you is lost.
   > **Advantage:** Decreases the chance of mis-communication between you and the child, and your incorporation of incorrect details during later questioning, or in your reports.

Acquisition of WH Words
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"Concrete" Wh words

WHat
First of the concrete WH words to appear, somewhere around 2+ years,
in 2-word stage: Used as "What that?"
"What that is?", "What X doing?" = 3-word stage
"What is that?" by age 5-1/2.
> Note: Children who can produce What..doing? questions do not
> necessarily understand the use of "what" in other ways ("What did you
> hit?," and generally respond poorly to the abstract question "What
> happened?")

WHere
Appears about same time as What: "Where Mommy?" but before
What, when What is used to ask about an act: "What X doing?"
Even with older children (preschool), "Where" can be understood best when
the "where" is a familiar place; may not be able to respond if unfamiliar place.

WHo
Shows up a little later than What and Where. Young children (about 2;6 - 3)
accurate when speaking about themselves as the Who. Not as under-
standing if someone else is the Who. Can mix up Who with What, What-
doing, or Where..

"Abstract" WH words

WHy
Used to ask questions even before age 3, but is not thoroughly understood as
part of a cause-effect relationship until as late as 10. Along with "When,"
probably requires the most cognitive power to understand.

How
Can appear at about age 2;11, but often used to mean Why as in
"How they can't talk?" From pre-schoolers, How questions (How did that
happen? How do you say your name?) often get non-responsive answers or
none at all. Responding to concept How questions (how much, how long, how
many) is a skill many adults have not mastered.

WHen
Usually used by children at 3-word stage: "When Daddy home?", but the
ability to respond accurately requires understanding the concept of time itself,
at about age 9 or 10.

What You Always Wanted to Know about WH Questions but were Afraid to Ask
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1.   Q. What IS a "WH" question?
        A. It's a question that <u>begins</u> with a WH word, and it is often called an "open-ended" question. The answer must supply the information left blank by the WH word.

2.   Q. What ARE WH words?
        A. Mostly words that begin with WH, of course! Like: Who, What, Where, When, Why, Which -- but then there's How also. (You could spell it WHow, I guess, if this bothers you.)

3.   Q. Are all WH questions created equal?
        A. No.
                - Some of them allow for no freedom. They ask for a single, specific piece of information.
                Ex: "What is your name?" can only be satisfied by giving your name.
                - Some of them still restrict freedom, but give room for a broader response. "What do you think of Mac?" can be answered in a couple of words ("Not much"), or by a long discussion of relationships and feelings.
                - Some wide open ones give a lot of freedom, but place more demands on your ability to remember, organize, and report coherently. Whether at home or in court, the most common broad WH question is probably, "What happened?" And because of the cognitive/linguistic demands it makes, it is difficult for most children under about age 9 to respond in an adult-satisfactory way.

4.   Q. When do children start using WH words, and in what order?
        A. By age 3, children are driving parents crazy asking Why. (It's a way to keep you talking.) But WH words begin to show up in children's speech starting at about 2-1/2 years, and in the following general order.
                WHat
                WHere
                WHo
                WHy
                How
                WHen

        That's <u>asking</u> the WH questions. The ability to give appropriate, grammatical answers to WH questions is usually acquired by about age 5-1/2.
        The ability to give an appropriate <u>cognitive</u> response to questions that begin with WHy, How, and WHen comes later -- at about age 10.

THINGS TO REMEMBER
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1. LISTEN
   to the child's language.
   Try to make your language fit his or hers.

2. KEEP IN MIND
   that experience shapes language use and understanding.
   That means that each child is unique.

3. REMEMBER
   that language is acquired gradually,
   and in uneven steps.

4. BE ALERT
   to the fact that young children both use and interpret language
   very literally.

5. DON'T TAKE FOR GRANTED
   that you know what the child means, or
   that the child knows what you mean.

6. SPEAK CLEARLY; SLOW DOWN
   Children need more time to process than adults do;
   your way of speaking may be unfamiliar.

7. SILENCE IS OKAY.
   Wait quietly after you've asked a question.
   Try 10 seconds.
   You may get information you would have missed.

8. AFTER A QUESTION, ASK YOURSELF:
   "Is this a response I'm hearing, or an answer?"

9. IN GENERAL,
   keep whatever you ask or say,

SHORT AND SIMPLE.