

Stages of Communication Development in Children

Communication isn't just about talking. A child first learns about communication by understanding the environment and people around him/her. As the child grows older, he/she gradually starts to express what is on his/her mind, first by actions and sounds, then words, and eventually sentences.

In this booklet, we have divided a child's communication development into six main stages: exploration, intentionality, first words, combining words, first sentences, and longer sentences. The following pages describe the behaviours your child may demonstrate in each stage, under two sections: how they understand their environment and how they express themselves.



1. Stage of Exploration



How they understand their environment

Your child starts to learn the meaning of words:

- Recognises familiar faces.
- Turns head towards sounds and voices.
- Interested in toys or items that make sounds.
- Looks at you, smiles or moves his/her body (wiggles, kicks), or stops moving when he/she hears you.
- Understands a few familiar actions in common daily activities, such as reaching out when you stretch your arms out to carry him/her.

How they express themselves

Your child responds and reacts to the environment:

- Cries in different ways.
- Begins to copy actions.
- Copies sounds you make.
- Makes different facial expressions depending on the situation.
- Smiles and laughs when you play Peek-a-boo.
- Moves towards something he/she wants.
- Turns head away or closes his/her eyes to something he/she does not want.
- Makes different sounds - at first, simpler sounds like 'Aah', 'Ooh', 'Guh', 'Muh', then longer sounds like 'Gagaga', 'Mamama', 'Papapa'.

2. Stage of Intentionality



How they understand their environment

Your child understands commonly experienced words in familiar routines:

- Responds to own name.
- Identify familiar objects, such as bottle, light, ball.
- Understands 'byebye', 'up', 'no'.
- Uses gestures such as pointing or body movements to respond to simple questions like "Where's your shoe?"
- Begins to follow simple one-step instructions in context.

How they express themselves

Your child sends their message using a combination of facial expressions, sounds and gestures without words:

- Shakes head for 'no'.
- Brings a bottle to you to open.
- Hands you a leaf to show you.
- Waves 'byebye' or 'hello'.
- Copies actions and begins to copy sounds.
- Makes sounds or use gestures to call for your attention.
- Points at something interesting then looks back at you.
- Continues making different sounds, which may sound like baby talking.
- Begins to say one word to mean something specifically, such as 'papa' (for dad), 'mama' (for mum), 'nana' (for banana).

3. Stage of First Words



How they understand their environment

Your child understands many familiar words:

- Points to body parts.
- Points to everyday objects.
- Does common actions like sleep, sit, clap.
- Follows a few simple instructions without you showing him/her or giving clues, e.g. 'hug the bear'.
- Responds to simple questions like "What do you want to drink?"

How they express themselves

Your child sends their messages using single words most of the time:

- Copies sounds and words that you say.
- Uses a variety of vocabulary
 - Names of people and objects
 - Social words like 'bye'
 - Action words
- Uses gestures and words together.
- At the beginning of this stage, uses 10-25 words. Towards the end of this stage, uses 25-50 words.

4. Stage of Combining Words



How they understand their environment

Your child understands many words, including more complex ideas:

- Understands opposite concepts, such as in/out, big/small, over/under, dirty/clean, fast/slow.
- Follows two-step related instructions, such as 'Remove your socks and put them in the laundry basket'.
- Starts to follow simple, short stories.

How they express themselves

Your child sends their messages using a combination of words (not memorised expressions):

- Uses at least 50 different words.
- Answers simple who-, where- and what- questions, with 2–3-word phrases, such as 'My mama', 'Bottle there', 'Go swimming'.
- Begins to string three or more words when talking (e.g. 'Mama more water').
- Asks some questions (e.g., what, where).

5. Stage of First Sentences



How they understand their environment

Your child understands longer and more complicated sentences:

- Follows 2-step unrelated instructions without you showing or using gestures (e.g., clap and sit on the green circle).
- Understands simple stories and tells what comes next in a familiar story.

How they express themselves

Your child sends their messages using sentences most of the time (not memorised expressions):

- Uses many different words to specifically describe meanings (e.g, 'behind/between' instead of 'here/there').
- Uses connectors like 'and', 'but' and 'because' to form longer sentences.
- Asks more questions (e.g., what, where, who, why).
- Answers questions about self, like 'What is your name?', 'How old are you?'
- Talks about an event.
- Participates in a conversation with back-and-forth exchanges.

6. Stage of Longer Sentences



How they understand their environment

Your child understands stories:

- Understands and uses words to describe time (e.g. yesterday, morning, first, later).
- Answers simple questions about stories.
- Ask and answers 'why', 'when' and 'how' questions.

How they express themselves

Your child is able to tell stories:

- Names items from a category (e.g., animals).
- Uses grammatically correct sentences, including pronouns.
- Tells events in story logically (e.g., 'Teacher scolded Alan because he pushed my friend').
- Have increasingly longer conversations with many different people, familiar and unfamiliar.

References:

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3. Weitzman, E., & Greenberg J. (2002). Learning Language and Loving it: A Guide to Promoting Children's Social, Language and Literacy Development in Early Childhood Settings, 2nd ed. Toronto: The Hanen Centre.

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