

Speech & Language Development for Multiples

This information is provided to help you understand early speech and language development in children. If you have concerns about your children's speech or language development, please check with your doctor, pediatrician or other healthcare professional regarding your personal situation.

Knowing the Risks

Multiples are more likely to have speech delays than singleton children, but twins and triplets are equally to have speech delays¹⁰, so you may want to be aware of the risks and how you can support your children's speech and language development.

Children of multiple births are at increased risk for speech and/or language delay for many reasons including the following:

- Premature birth,
- Low birth weight,
- Obstetric complications, and
- Environmental factors^{1,2}

Speech and language delays may be present in one or more children who are part of a group of multiples. For children of multiple births, speech and language delays are typically mild when there are no other complications², however even mild speech and language delays can be cause for concern and should be addressed. When left untreated, a mild speech and language delay can become more pronounced, increasing the gap between the delayed child and his/her same-age peers.

Even though twins are in a unique environment before and after birth, this does not explain why twins are more likely to have speech and language delays. Social-environmental factors are most often the cause of language delay in multiples. Having two or more children of the same age and developmental stage living together means that those children are being exposed to a different language environment than their singleton peers. Due to the significant demands placed on parents of twins, less time is available to spend with children interacting and providing one-to-one language models.²

Twin Language

The presence of a twin language, or "cryptophasia"³ is related to the presence of a language delay. Sometimes people think that twins speak their own language, however very few children actually use this unique form of communication.^{2, 11} Most often what is described as "twin language" is the use of delayed speech and language by one or both children.^{1, 3} It is possible that co-twins are reinforcing each others' immature language, which can result in the problem persisting.³ "Twin language" typically indicates future challenges with speech and language development and should be a cause for parental concern.²

Typical Speech and Language Skills

If you are wondering whether to be concerned about your child, the following chart can help you to understand what speech and language skills children typically use at different ages from birth to five years old.

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The following chart is intended for average healthy children born at full term. If your children were born prematurely, remember to adjust their age by the number of weeks they were premature when evaluating whether they have reached the developmental stages described.

<p>By 6 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Turns to source of sounds makes different cries for different needs (I'm hungry, I'm tired) • Watches your face as you talk • Smiles and laughs in response to your smiles and laughs • Imitates coughs or other sounds (<i>ah, eh, buh</i>) 	<p>By 9 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responds to his/her name • Understands being told "no" • Gets what he/she wants through sounds and gestures (e.g., reaching to be picked up) • Plays social games with you (e.g., peek-a-boo) • Babbles and repeats sounds (<i>babababa, duhduhduh</i>) 	<p>By 12 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follows simple one-step directions ("sit down") • Looks across the room to something you point to • Uses three or more words • Uses gestures to communicate (waves "bye bye", shakes head "no") • Gets your attention using sounds, gestures and pointing • Brings you toys to show you • Combines lots of sounds as though talking (<i>abada baduh</i>)
<p>By 18 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Points to several body parts • Uses at least 20 words • Responds to simple questions ("Where's teddy?", "What's that?") • Demonstrates some pretend play with toys (e.g. gives teddy a drink) • Makes at least four different consonant sounds (e.g. b, n, d, g, w, h) 	<p>By 24 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follows two-step directions - "Go find your teddy bear and show it to Grandma" • Uses 100 or more words • Consistently combines two or more words in short phrases - "daddy hat", "truck go down" • People can understand his/her words 50 to 60 per cent of the time 	<p>By 30 months</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands the concepts of size and quantity • Uses some adult grammar ("two cookies", "bird flying", "I jumped") • Uses more than 350 words • Combines several actions in play (feeds doll then puts her to sleep; puts blocks in train then drives train and drops blocks off) • Produces words with two or more syllables ("ba-na-na", "a-pple")
<p>By Age 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understands "who", "what", "where" and "why" questions • Creates long sentences, using 5 or more words • Talks about past events - trip to grandparents' house • Tells simple stories • Engages in multi-step pretend play (cooking a meal, repairing a car) • Is understood by most people outside of the family, most of the time 	<p>By Age 4</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follows directions involving 3 or more steps ("First get some paper, then draw a picture, last give it to mom") • Uses adult-type grammar • Tells stories with a clear beginning, middle and end • Talks to try to solve problems with adults and other children • Demonstrates increasingly complex imaginative play • Is understood by strangers almost all of the time 	<p>By Age 5</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Follows group directions ("all the boys get a toy") • Understands directions involving "if...then" ("If you're wearing runners, then line up for gym") • Describes past, present and future events in detail • Uses almost all of the sounds of their language with few to no errors

This chart was adapted from the developmental norms published by the Ontario Ministry of Children and Youth Services in 2011. ^{4, 5}

Developing Your Preschooler's Speech and Language Skills

You can help your child to develop speech and language skills by providing him/her with a rich language environment both at home and in the community.^{2, 6} For example, you can help expand your child's vocabulary by talking to him/her at the grocery store about all the different foods, what they look like, and how they taste. Research based strategies that parents can use to encourage speech and language development can be found at: www.caslpa.ca and www.hanen.org.

Caroline Bowen, Speech-Language Pathologist discusses, language facilitation strategies specifically for twins and multiples.¹ Some highlights include:

1. Create opportunities for your children to talk with you individually, for example do bedtime stories separately. During this time you can give each child some directions and praise. For example, "Jen, first get a book then come to the chair...Great Jen, you brought Mommy an interesting story!"
2. When your children are together, let them each have a couple of turns in conversation with you without being interrupted. If one child asks you a question, answer them directly. Pause often to let the children collect their thoughts and share their ideas.

Further suggestions can be found on Caroline's website: http://www.speech-language-therapy.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=36:twins&catid=11:admin.

When and Where to get Help

Although some children's language delays go away with time, others do not and can affect long term speech and language development, academic and social skills.⁷ Therefore, speech-language pathologists advocate strongly against a "wait and see" approach.

"It is often hard to detect if your infant or toddler has a speech or language problem. Trust your instincts. If you suspect a problem, talk to your family doctor or see a Speech-Language Pathologist. If a speech or language problem goes unnoticed the child may face life-long difficulties. Even children under the age of two can be helped with speech and language development."⁸

Publically funded preschool speech and language services exist in all Canadian provinces and territories. Parents can usually refer themselves by contacting their local preschool speech and language program. Call early, waitlists are often lengthy.

For a fee, private speech and language are also available across Canada. Speech-language pathologists participating in private practice can be found through: www.caslpa.ca, www.caslpo.com (in Ontario), the yellow pages, or a local Google search. When surveyed, therapists suggested looking for a SLP who is child friendly, knowledgeable and experienced, and works with parents as partners.⁸

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Documents and Articles

Multiple Births Canada Fact Sheets on various topics

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