

A parent's guide to... speech

By Penny Tassoni, early years consultant and author

Children's speech is such a hot topic that the Government has appointed a speech tsar, or to be more precise, a 'champion of communication'. If you are the parent of a child who rarely stops talking, this may all seem a bit ludicrous, but dig a little under the hype and suddenly the focus on children's speech makes perfect sense.

A good starting point is to understand the role of language in children's lives, and indeed in our own. Language is used in all sorts of ways. First, it's a tool for communication. We use it to let others know what we want and also to understand what others are saying to us. This alone is important, because once children have mastered enough language to do this, they become less frustrated and usually far more co-operative. Strong language is also needed to develop friendships and, once in school, to read and write.

THINKING AND LISTENING

While the benefits of language for communication are impressive, perhaps the real magic in language is the way that it allows us to think, reason and make new connections in our minds. This is the point when children start to ask very

interesting questions such as, 'How does the water in clouds stay up there?' or 'Where was I before I was born?'

While such questions may totally floor you, take heart; at least you know your child is using language in quite sophisticated ways. Alongside these skills, children also need good language levels in order to listen and take in information. This is essential, as quite a lot of learning situations require children to learn from the spoken word. That is, a teacher may explain a maths problem or a visitor to the school may talk about their childhood experiences. Children with poor language skills may try hard to listen, but will probably not be able to retain much about what has been said and so lose out on some learning.

So, given that language is of such importance, here are a few tips that might help you to check that your child's language is on track, and also to develop it further.

Let's begin by looking at babies and toddlers. They need to break through the sound barrier and work out what the words we use mean. This takes time, but most babies begin to crack the code by around ten months. Look to see if your baby has worked out the



meanings of a few words.

Once babies have started to do this, then a few months later they will begin to actually use a few words. You might miss them, as they can be wrapped up in babble. But by around 18 months, the chances are that your child will have several words that are used fairly consistently. (Don't worry if they are not clear – for example, 'duddle' for cuddle.)

If, at this point, your child is not saying any words, it might be that your child is just a slow starter who will suddenly talk in whole sentences, but it is worth talking it over with your health visitor nonetheless. It may be that your child is not fully hearing, or needs a little more time with you.

Once children get their first words, things begin to hot up. Words are acquired quickly – single ones at first, but then they begin to join them up. 'All gone' is often a favourite, along with the ubiquitous 'no'.

The pace continues so that by a child's third birthday, they are often using short sentences and speaking fairly clearly.

Fluency in language usually comes at around four years old, although not all sounds are quite in place. Expect

CASE STUDY

Josh was nearly two years old when I realised that he should have been saying words rather than just babbling and pointing. I had noticed that my friend's daughter who is the same age as Josh was talking, but I thought that it was because she was a girl.

It was at a children's party that I started to panic. There were quite a few boys of Josh's age who were saying words and pointing out things to their parents. The next day I phoned my health visitor, who was great. She gave me a list of things to try.

Top of the list was to wean Josh off his dummy and also to allow him more time to reply to

my comments or questions. She also suggested making sure that each day, we had several little times together when I could play with him, read a book and also let him help me around the house. Following her advice, I also tried to build a few routines into the day when we did the same thing each time.

Getting rid of the dummy was not easy, but once it had gone this made a huge difference. Quite quickly Josh began to use words. The first ones were at bath time, when he would say 'quack' when I handed him the duck and 'toes' when I tickled his feet. Now he's nearly three and he's chattering away.

some wonderful grammar such as 'we tooked' or 'we swummed' as children get to grips with the complexity of the English language.

TIPS TO HELP YOUR CHILD'S LANGUAGE

Babies and toddlers

- Give plenty of cuddles and eye contact.
- Point out and name objects – for example, 'Look at that cat!'
- Avoid having the TV and radio on as background noise.
- Sing rhymes and share simple picture books with your child.
- Involve your toddler in what you are doing – for example, give them a spoon to hold if you are cooking, or a bag in the supermarket

Two years onwards

- Make sure that your child has

some chewy foods every day – this will help with sound development, as it exercises their jaw and mouth muscles.

- Involve your child in day-to-day activities such as cooking and tidying, and chat along with them.
- Take time to have proper chats with your child – for example, sit down at his or her level.
- Try to keep curbs on how much time you spend using 'organisational language' – for example, 'come and put your shoes on' – as this is quite limiting for children.
- Read to your child every day. Choose books that you both enjoy.
- Once your child is speaking fluently, you can help develop language for reasoning by asking questions such as 'why do you think...'