

# Toddler Language



PEDIATRIC CARE • SUPPORTING • PARENTING  
A Program of ZERO TO THREE

## SHOULD I BE WORRIED ABOUT MY TODDLER'S LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT?

Typical toddler language development varies widely. Some toddlers may not be able to say words, but they communicate in many other ways. They might cry, babble, gesture, point, and make faces. Toddlers understand much more than they can say. Most children say their first word between 10 and 14 months old. Most children will say at least 10 words by 18 months. It's typical to understand  $\frac{2}{4}$  of a child's language at 2,  $\frac{3}{4}$  at 3, and  $\frac{4}{4}$  at 4!



## YOU CAN HELP YOUR BABY OR TODDLER DEVELOP VERBAL SKILLS:

- **Talk with and listen to your child.** When you talk, give them time to respond. Bend down to make eye contact at their level. This will communicate your desire to hear what they have to say. Ask open-ended questions: "What do you think about today's rainy weather?" or, "Where do you think the rain goes?"
- **Teach your child about nonverbal communication.** "Luis, do you see how Andie is frowning and holding her hands up to cover her face? She doesn't like it when you throw the ball so hard. Please throw it softer so she will want to keep playing catch with you."
- **Help your child develop a "feelings" vocabulary.** Name emotions when you see them. Say, "You seem sad that Mommy left on her trip." Or, "You look so proud of how tall your tower is!" Feelings are not good or bad, they just are. Don't be afraid that if you talk about a feeling, it will intensify. Many times, the opposite is true. When children see that their feelings are noticed, they are more able to move on. Remember, name it to tame it.
- **Read together.** Cuddle up for quiet times with books. Let your toddler turn the pages and point to what they see. If your child isn't ready to listen to the story, just talking about the pictures is fine. Ask your child how the characters might be feeling and wonder together what will happen next. See if they can tell you the story based on the illustrations.

Reading is great because it builds vocabulary beyond their day-to-day life. Your child won't see many hippos around them, but they can learn about them from books.

- **“Sportscast” your daily routines.** This helps your child connect words with objects and actions. “I’m wiping down the table with a sponge.” Talk about what you’re doing as you care for your child. “You’re getting undressed. Let’s take your arms out of your shirt and your legs out of your pants.”
- **Encourage pretend play.** Children may express themselves more freely if they’re pretending. It may feel safer to talk about how Teddy Bear is afraid of the dark. Pretend play is also a chance to act out what different people might say, think, or do. This kind of play develops language as well as social skills, like empathy.
- **Make your requests clear and simple.** Make sure your communication is good for your child’s age and ability. For a 1-year-old, you can give one step directions like, “Go get the ball.” For an 18-month-old, you can try two steps. Say, “Please go to your room and get your shoes.” Get your child’s attention first by saying their name or gently touching their shoulder. Make eye contact. You can ask an older child to repeat back your words. Then you can be sure they heard and understood you.

If you are worried about your child’s ability to communicate, talk with your HealthySteps Specialist. Pretty soon you will have the opposite problem! Your child will likely be talking all the time and asking you many questions.

