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Something Wrong or Nothing Wrong? My Child's Speech and Language Development

"My son is 2 years old but he is not talking yet. My relatives told me not to worry and wait until he's 5 before getting help"

"My child doesn't seem to understand what I'm saying"

"My daughter is 3 years old but she can't seem to use a complete sentence."

The statements above reflect the concerns that parents have about their child and the distress they feel about it. Parents are often the first people to notice that their child is not speaking like other children. Is the child experiencing a speech and language delay? Or is it normal to speak that way at that age?

Speech and language are two different skills. Speech is the sounds that we have in our language and the ability to produce them to make up words and sentences. Language, on the other hand, is the ability to use those words and sentences to convey ideas. Together, speech and language allows a person to communicate. So, anytime a child cannot communicate his needs, a speech pathologist will look at whether he cannot understand speech and language or whether he cannot use speech and language.

The following milestones may help alleviate your concerns about your child's speech and language development. Generally, a child uses understandable speech by age 4 and uses all speech sounds correctly by age 7:

Birth to 6 months:	The child will coo, babble and make simple vocalizations.
7 to 12 months:	The child's babbling becomes more complex (e.g. ma-ma-ma, bado-bado) and the first word will appear
13 to 18 months:	The child can say 10 to 20 new words and understands a lot of what you say
18 to 24 months:	The child will say about 250 to 300 words and begin to combine words to make 2- and 3--word phrases and sentences
2 to 3 years:	The child's sentences will contain about 3-4 words
3 to 5 years:	The child will be able to carry on a conversation, ask and answer questions, follow and give directions and speak alone in the presence of a group
5 years and beyond:	The child's sentences become increasingly more complex. They will tell jokes, report experiences, seek information, express abstract ideas, use hints and sarcasm, describe feelings and other reactions.

When is a problem a problem? In a nutshell.....

- when your **three-year old** uses mostly one or two words at a time, has speech that is not understandable, cannot answer simple "what" or "who" questions, doesn't understand or hear what is said, doesn't start conversations and speaks only when spoken to, doesn't understand your instructions and repeats what is said instead of responding.
- when your **four-year old** uses mostly 2- or 3-words phrases, cannot answer simple "what", "where" or "why" questions, has jumbled up words or sentences, doesn't understand simple 2-step instructions like "go to the bedroom and get mummy's handbag", has a hard time listening to a short story (2-3 sentences) and answering simple questions about it and needs a lot of prodding to talk to people or peers.
- When your **five-year old** speaks only in 3- to 4-words sentences, has unclear speech (doesn't say speech sounds correctly), has a hard time answering questions about "yesterday" and "tomorrow", talks a lot but remarks are not relevant to the situation, has difficulty listening to longer stories (4-5 sentences) without "tuning out".

If you are unsure about the quality of your child's speech and language, do not hesitate to seek the help of a speech language pathologist, no matter how young your child is. The speech language pathologist will be able to look at your child's strengths and weaknesses in communication and make the best decision about treatment or referral to other professionals whom your child may benefit from.