Early Years Development Program

Language development in early childhood

Typical language development, red flags, language based activities

Brisbane South PHN in collaboration with The University of Queensland
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Early Years Development Program

Please contact the Early Years Development Program at eydp@bsphn.org.au
Early Years Development Program

In the first five years of a child’s life their brain is more able to learn and change when exposed to new things.

FOREWORD

This booklet has been produced by speech pathology students from the University of Queensland in collaboration with the Brisbane South PHN’s Early Years Development Program.

It is designed to be used in conjunction with the Parent Evaluation of Development Survey (PEDS). As part of the Early Years Development Program, the PEDS is used within early childhood education and care centres to identify children who are potentially developmentally vulnerable.

As well as this, the strategies and activities can be of benefit to all children, with the aim of creating a language rich and supportive environment.

This booklet will provide early childhood educators (ECEs) with strategies and activities they can use to help children identified as vulnerable in the classroom, while they wait to receive further support.

The first five years of a child’s life are critical for their development and the experiences they have in these years help shape the adults they will become.

A child develops along a continuum, learning new skills in language, movement etc., from the time they are born. Therefore, a child could have no or minimal developmental problems when intervention and support is implemented early, depending on the underlying reason for the vulnerability.

Infants and children in the Brisbane South PHN region will benefit greatly from early identification of developmental vulnerabilities, particularly in the pre-school years when the benefits of early intervention are maximised.

The Early Years Development Program is aimed at the early identification and treatment of children with developmental vulnerabilities.

In the Brisbane South PHN region, children have a slightly higher developmental vulnerability than the Australian average and 15.1% of children in the region are considered vulnerable in the areas of language and cognitive skills.
Oral language skills are associated with the development of literacy skills (i.e. reading and writing) and future academic success. They are also associated with good social and emotional development. The preschool years, between 0 and 5 years of age, are a critical period for language development.

ECEs can play an important role in this development by providing a language rich environment.

This booklet provides ECEs with:

- General strategies to use in the classroom
- Specific activity ideas to support language development
- Extension activities that can build upon language development

This booklet is designed to provide ECEs with information on typical language development and what appropriate language skills look like across different age ranges in the preschool years.

Within this resource, is information to help ECEs identify signs of potential language delays or difficulties, activities to help support the development of language, and appropriate referral recommendations. Information has also been included on hearing, behaviour and children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and how these may impact language development.
Language is what we say, understand, read, and write

In the preschool population this mainly relates to talking and understanding others, as most children are not yet reading and writing or are only just beginning to learn these skills.

Language is made up of a socially shared set of rules which include:

- What words mean.
- How to make new words by adding new beginnings and endings e.g. finished or undo.
- How words go together to make sentences.
- The way we should speak in different situations. e.g. the difference between talking to a friend versus talking to a teacher.

Language can be divided into two main areas:

**RECEPTIVE LANGUAGE**

This refers to understanding.

*Can the child understand instructions and questions?*

**EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE**

This refers to talking or a child’s use of language to communicate with others.

*Are they able to easily get their message across to others?*
Other aspects of communication

- **Speech** – This refers to the physical process of producing sounds. It involves the use of our lips, tongue, teeth and mouth to articulate (or make sounds) that then go together to make words. An example of a speech difficulty for children may be saying ‘wed’ for ‘red’.

- **Voice** – the sound of our voice, e.g. does it sound harsh or strained?

- **Fluency of speech** – some children have a stutter which affects the flow of their talking. They may repeat sounds, syllables or words, e.g. wa-wa-water. These are not related to a child’s language skills/abilities which is the focus of this booklet.

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**EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGE**

Expressive language is the ability to use language whether it be verbal, written or signed. These skills can include being able to put words together to form grammatically correct sentences, retell or write a story, answer questions and being able to label objects within the environment.

Expressive language is important because it enables people to express their wants and needs, thoughts and ideas, argue a point of view, develop their use of language in writing and engage in successful interactions with others.

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**RECEPTIVE LANGUAGE**

Receptive language is the ability to understand verbal, written or signed language. It requires the ability to gain information and meaning from routines, visual information from the environment, sounds and words, concepts such as size, shape, colour and time, grammar and written information.

Children who have understanding difficulties may find it challenging to follow instructions at home or within the educational setting and may not respond appropriately to questions and requests. Within the school setting, difficulties in understanding may result in attention and listening and/or behavioural difficulties.

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**Behavioural impacts**

Children with language difficulties can also have emotional and behavioural issues. They can find it difficult to make friends, as they don’t have the language necessary for developing social networks. Studies have shown that children with language difficulties will often have co-occurring emotional and behavioral issues, which are associated with higher rates of social isolation amongst their peers.

Rates of loneliness and depression are also higher amongst these children, with behavioural issues more common in boys. Children with behavioural issues may also have difficulty controlling behaviour, and present as moody, aggressive and can also over-react to situations.
Hearing impairment is a relatively common disorder, which can impact on a child’s speech and language development. There are a range of factors which have the potential to influence the degree of impact hearing impairment can have on a child’s communication.

**Some of these factors include the following:**

1. **The child’s age at onset of hearing impairment** – Children who have a later onset of hearing impairment will have a higher level of speech and language compared to children who have an earlier onset. This is due to more time being exposed to speech and language.

2. **Severity of the hearing impairment** – A child with a more severe hearing loss will have less exposure to speech and language and therefore will most likely have greater communication issues.

3. **The age of identification of hearing impairment** – The earlier a child’s hearing loss is identified, the earlier an intervention can be put in place. Interventions may include amplification through hearing aids, cochlear implants or speech and language intervention, the earlier intervention is implemented, the greater the likelihood of positive speech and language outcomes.
**Signs of hearing impairment**

Within the first 6 months of life children with hearing impairment present similarly to children with typical hearing.

At this stage children produce basic sounds, which include crying and burping. It is as children get older that differences in sound and language development becomes evident.

**Some signs that your child could have a hearing impairment may include the following:**

- Your child does not develop babbling or their first word at the expected ages.
- Your child may have a smaller vocabulary to other children the same age.
- Your child does not respond to their name or sounds.
- Your child may have unclear speech, in particular vowels sounds may be distorted.
- Your child may omit sounds at the beginning and end of words.
- Your child may speak noticeably slower than other children their age, with frequent pauses and uncoordinated breathing when talking.

If you are concerned about your child’s hearing consult your local GP, as a referral to an Audiologist for a hearing assessment may be necessary.

A medicare rebate for this service is available.

Early identification and intervention is key to achieving positive speech and language results.
Children who are bilingual have the ability to understand and/or use two languages and have many other elements that need to be considered when determining whether language difficulties are present.

**Simultaneous bilinguals**

This term refers to children who are exposed to two languages at home, where one language will often become more dominant. Generally, these children will reach their language milestones (such as first words, combination of words, grammar and narrative skills) at a similar age to their monolingual peers (only use/understand one language).

**Sequential bilinguals**

This term refers to children who have first language established at home, before a second language is introduced (such as only learning English when they start to attend kindergarten).

Children may also display a ‘silent period’ (where language development may appear to stagnate for approximately six months) when the second language is introduced. Alternatively they may display ‘code switching’ (when children swap between languages, e.g. may start a sentence in one language and finish in the other).

Once the second language has been introduced children may either decline or plateau in the use of their first language, or children may have both languages develop together at a slower rate.
DEVELOPMENTAL MILESTONES

6 to 12 months

**RECEPTIVE**

- Understand approximately three to 50 words.
- Respond to sound even when they cannot see the what caused it.
- Respond to their name.
- Respond to simple instructions e.g: ‘stop that’.
- React to changes in tone of voice.
- Listen to a speaker and watch their face when spoken to.

**EXPRESSIVE LANGUAGES**

By 12 months children should have a vocabulary of approximately two to six words. These are typically names and objects that are well known to them.

- Still using jargon babble (baby talk)
- Begin to change voice tone (intonation)
- Use gestures along with vocalisations to request, refuse and comment.
# 12 months to 2 years

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<td>▪ Understand single words for objects that are not present.</td>
<td>▪ By two years children should have a vocabulary of approximately 200 – 300 words and their speech should be intelligible (able to be understood) 25 – 50% of the time.</td>
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<td>▪ Follow simple one-step directions, including spatial directions with words such as ‘in’ or ‘on’.</td>
<td>▪ Use up to three word utterances.</td>
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<td>▪ Answer ‘where’, ‘what’ and ‘yes/no’ questions.</td>
<td>▪ Start to use the pronouns ‘I’ and ‘it’.</td>
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<td>▪ Point to pictures in a book when named.</td>
<td>▪ Start to use ‘ing’ on the end of verbs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>▪ Listen to simple stories.</td>
<td>▪ Start to use some prepositions, such as ‘in’, ‘on’ and ‘under’.</td>
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| ▪ Start to use simple questions such as ‘What’s that?’.
## 2 to 3 years

### RECEPTIVE
- Answer two stage commands e.g. ‘Get your socks and put them in the basket’.
- Understand contrasting concepts e.g. hot/cold, stop/go, nice/yucky.
- Notice sounds like the telephone or doorbell ringing and may point or become excited, get you to answer, or attempt to answer.
- Recognises and uses questions about familiar people, objects, and body parts.
- Understand ‘why’ questions.
- Understands basic spatial terms (in, on, under).
- Has concept of ‘one’ and ‘all’ and ‘big’ and ‘little’.
- Can answer ‘where’ and ‘what doing’ questions.

### EXPRESSIVE
- Vocabulary explodes child begins to talk instead of relying on gestures/facial expressions.
- Uses simple phrases (18 – 24 months).
- Will draw attention to something by either naming it or one of it’s attributes.
- Intelligibility = ~50% at 2 years, ~75% at 3 years.
- Family members can usually understand them.
- Awareness and ability to use rhyme emerges.
- Asks simple ‘wh –’ questions.
- Uses ‘s for possession.
- Understands 1st person and 2nd person pronouns ‘you’.
- 3rd person pronouns are emerging e.g. ‘she’.
3 to 4 years

**RECEPTIVE**

- Able to follow longer and more complex directions that you give him and will be able to remember more information at once, such as ‘put the games away then go and wash your hands’.
- Learn new words quickly; know most common object names.
- Understand gender differences.
- Understand the difference between things that are the same and things that are different, such as the difference between children and grown-ups.
- Should be able to understand well over 1200 – 1500 words.
- Can hear you when you call from another room, hearing difficulties may become evident at this age (If you are in doubt about your child’s hearing, see a clinical audiologist).

**EXPRESSIVE**

- At age three the child should have around 1000 – 1500 words
- The child will talk about things that have happened away from home, and is interested in talking about pre-school, friends, outings and interesting experiences.
- Speech is usually fluent and clear and ‘other people’ can understand what the child is saying most of the time around 80% intelligibility.
- Frequently ask ‘why’ and ‘what.’
- Use words to communicate primarily now and will be using them to request things and activities, label things, describe things, comment on things, asking questions and answering questions.
- Learning how to put together longer and longer utterances on increasing complexity.
- Towards the end of this time frame, the child should be able to tell people their whole name and (as long as you’ve been talking about it) should be able to tell you what city they live in and maybe even what state (though the concepts may still be a little hard for them to understand).
4 to 5 years

**RECEPTIVE**

- Should be able to understand over 2500 – 2800 words.
- Able to understand short stories that they hear and can answer simple questions about the story (such as who, what, when, where, how and why).
- Understands spatial concepts (such as under, next to, in front), quantity concepts (such as more and most), basic shapes, colours and relationships between objects (for example: the boy who is jumping with the rope).
- Can understand sentences that contain pronouns and negatives.
- Understand basic and simple analogies (e.g.: If you sleep in a bed, you sit on a ____).
- Able to answer questions about the function of an object and can name basic objects based on hearing a description.
- Can answer ‘where’ and ‘what doing’ questions.

**EXPRESSIVE**

- Produces utterances that consist of 4-6 words and continue to increase in complexity and grammatical structure.
- Starting to become consistent using irregular verbs (such as ‘ate’ instead of ‘eated’) and possessives in speech. Pronouns (I, you, me, he, she) are used accurately with minimal errors
- Narration skills continue to increase as they are able to retell stories they have been told.
- At this stage, children will like to ask questions about everything, such as who, what, when, where, or why; possibly asking the same question multiple times.
- This stage is also where they become confident communicators with unfamiliar listeners.
- Should be able to use anywhere between 1000 – 2000 words.
This booklet has been designed to help support language development within the classroom environment.

To help support language development, there are a few simple techniques that can be used in everyday communication situations:

**Wait for the child to respond**

Be patient and wait for the child to respond during communication. This provides them with an opportunity to have a turn in the conversation, rather than having an adult ‘speak for them’. It will help them to increase their confidence which provides an important foundation for social communication use.

**Listen and respond to the child**

When communicating, ensure that you try making eye contact, getting down to their level or looking at their face. This allows you to give a meaningful response, rather than a ‘mmhmm’, to the child. This will help them build confidence in their communication skills.

**Expand on the child’s attempts**

Through active listening during conversation, it’s important to expand on the child’s communication attempts. This involves taking their attempt and responding with a complete grammatical sentence, providing them with a correct model of communication.

*For example*, when the child points and says ‘ball’, you could respond with ‘Yes that’s right, that is a ball’.
0 to 1 years

The following activities have been provided as a starting point to promote communication and school-readiness through increased language use in the classroom.

**Songs and Rhymes**

This activity helps to promote language development through repetition of sounds in words. This can be incorporated into any activity during the day or used during a musical activity.

**Talking through Routines**

This activity helps children to understand that voice and sound are connected through movements of the mouth, with movements imitated as the child grows older. It can be used during any routine (such as changing a nappy or getting dressed). Remember to pause and give the child some time to respond.

**Reading Pictures and Books**

This activity is great for developing turn-taking interactions and also helps to associate pictures with words. You may want to start with one picture per card/page and build up from there, whilst also beginning to talk about the object (e.g. colour, shape or use).

**Peek-A-Boo**

This activity is a great way to engage in play, and helps the child to learn that objects exist even when you can’t see them (this is called object permanence). You may like to alternate between covering your face and then the child’s. Make sure you show excitement if they remove the blanket to find you.

**Actions and Imitations**

Demonstrating simple gestures for the child to copy provides the stepping-stones for expressive communication. This activity will help the child to develop movement but can also help increase their knowledge of words through talking about the actions you are doing (e.g. when pretending to play the drums).
1 to 3 years

**Story time**
This activity allows many opportunities for language development and can be used at any time. When reading a story, make it interactive by allowing the child to turn the page, naming what they point to or what they see happening, pausing in the middle of the repeated line and allow them to fill in the blanks. By reading various stories with them, they are given the opportunity to hear many new words.

**Introduce sound play**
This activity allows you to introduce the child to a variety of sounds and words that are used in play, such as vehicle noises or animal sounds. By getting the child to imitate or point to the picture or object, you’re showing them that pictures can also be a physical object.

**Talking about feelings**
This activity gives the child the opportunity to make a link between different feelings and how we can explain them. Begin by watching the child’s body language and describing it for them, providing them with a model of how they could express themselves with words as well as actions.

Words may include: annoyed, disappointed, upset, relaxed or excited.

**Sing together**
This activity builds upon ‘Songs and Rhymes’ previously listed, and continues to expand on knowledge of patterns in words and sounds.

Try to increase the complexity of the activity, add in the child’s name or more difficult actions. You may also like to include various nursery rhymes and invite them to repeat any simple phrases in the song.

**Action words**
This activity helps the child to learn words that describe movements. It’s important to continue to describe what you’re doing, and use gesture to supplement the child’s understanding. You may want to begin by imitating the child’s movements first, and then suggesting new actions to try.

You can also build the activity up to include words such as ‘in’, ‘out’, and ‘around’ to develop their use of prepositions (words showing position or direction).
3 to 5 years

**Who, what, where, when, how and why**
This activity encourages the child to describe objects, people and places through conversation using the words they already know whilst continuing to learn new words. It’s also important to ask questions about – ‘when’, ‘how’ and ‘why’ to encourage reflection about time, processes and reasons to think deeper and provide answers that consist of multiple parts.

**A book about me**
This activity provides many opportunities for the child to display their language skills by creating a book containing items and information that’s important to them. This allows the child to retell stories surrounding a particular item, or to practice their spelling by writing simple words next to pictures.

**Two step directions**
Introducing the child to directions that require multiple steps provides an opportunity to develop an understanding that all parts of a task need to be completed. By developing this lifelong skill, it allows them to prepare for the classroom environment. Keep it simple with two actions at first, and continue to add more actions as the child increases in confidence. Continue to adjust the number of actions as the child becomes confident, annoyed, disappointed, upset, relaxed or excited.

**Show and tell**
This activity provides multiple opportunities for language and can easily be incorporated into the daily classroom schedule. By allowing the child to show something, it provides them with an opportunity to practice their narrative skills (by telling a story), and allows them to use language they are familiar with.

**Syllable jump**
This activity can be applied to multiple words, but to start simply, demonstrate how to jump or take steps to the syllables in the child’s name. This activity can support the development of reading and spelling skills. Begin to include other familiar words, such as last name, favourite colour or name of pre school to make the activity more challenging.

**Simon says**
This activity builds on the child’s ability to follow two-step directions by allowing them an opportunity focus on verbal instructions when they are presented with conflicting information. This helps them to prepare for the classroom, where they will have to pay attention to the teacher while other distractions are going on.
HELPFUL LINKS

Speech Pathology Australia
This link has a range of fact sheets on a number of important topics:
www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au/

Audiology Australia Ltd
This link is a pathway to find audiology services and information:
www.audiology.asn.au/

Hanen’s Learning Language and Loving It
This link takes you to a language program aimed at early childhood educators which may be a PD for those who are interested in learning and doing more:
www.hanen.org/Programs/For-Educators/Learning-Language-Loving-It.aspx

Community Child Health and Development Programs (2017)
The Red Flags Early identification guide (for children aged birth to five years).
Queensland Government:

REFERENCES


www.linguisystems.com/pdf/Milestonesguide.pdf


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