



Speech & Language Milestones

Ages 3–5 Years

A guide for parents, carers and educators

Developmental Milestones at a Glance

At 3 years

Understanding

- Follow two-part instructions (e.g., give me the teddy and throw the ball)
- Understand "what", "where" and "who" questions
- Understand "same" and "different"
- Sort items into groups (e.g., toys vs food)
- Recognise some basic colours

Expressing

- Say four to five words in a sentence
- Use words for names, actions, locations and descriptions
- Ask "what", "where" and "who" questions
- Talk about the past (may over-use "-ed", e.g., "he goed there")
- Have a conversation but may not always take turns or stay on topic

Fine Motor

- Build a tower of nine small blocks
- Copy a circle; imitate a cross; snip paper with scissors
- Manipulate clay (roll balls, make snakes)
- Use non-dominant hand to assist and stabilise

At 4 years

Understanding

- Answer most questions about daily tasks
- Understand most "wh" questions including about a recently heard story
- Understand some numbers
- Show awareness that some words share starting or ending sounds

Expressing

- Use "and", "but" and "because" in longer sentences
- Describe recent events (e.g., morning routines)
- Ask lots of questions
- Use pronouns (he/she, me/you) and negations (don't/can't)
- Count to five and name a few colours

Fine Motor

- Cut on a line; copy a cross and square
- Write name and numbers 1–5; copy letters
- Handedness is well established
- Dresses and undresses independently

At 5 years

Understanding

- Follow three-part instructions
- Understand time words: "before", "after", "now", "later"
- Think about word meaning when learning
- Follow instructions without stopping to listen
- Begin to recognise some letters, sounds and numbers

Expressing

- Use well-formed sentences understood by most people
- Take turns in longer conversations
- Tell short stories with a beginning, middle and end
- Use past and future verbs correctly ("went", "will go")
- Use most sounds — may still have difficulty with "s", "r", "l", "th"

Source: www.speechpathologyaustralia.org.au

Speech Sound Development — Phonological Processes



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As children develop, they use simplified sound patterns called phonological processes. The table below shows when these are typically resolved. Consult a speech pathologist if patterns persist beyond these ages.

Phonological Process	Example	Resolved By
Reduplication	tiger = taitai; water = wawa	2;6 – 3;0
Pre-vocalic Voicing	pig = big	3;0
Word-final De-voicing	pig = pick	3;0
Final Consonant Deletion	comb = coe	3;3
Fronting	car = tar; ship = sip	3;6
Consonant Harmony	mine = mime; kittycat = tittytat	3;9
Weak Syllable Deletion	elephant = efant; potato = tato	4;0
Cluster Reduction	spoon = poon; train = chain; friend = pend	4;0
Deaffrication	chain = shain; watch = wash	4;6
Gliding of Liquids	run = one; leg = weg	5;0
Stopping /f/	fish = tish	3;0
Stopping /s/	soap = dope	3;0
Stopping /v/	very = berry	3;6
Stopping /z/	zoo = doo	3;6
Stopping "sh"	shop = dop	4;6
Stopping "j"	jump = dump	4;6
Stopping "ch"	chair = tare	4;6
Stopping voiceless "th"	thing = ting	5;0
Stopping voiced "th"	them = dem	5;0

References:

Bowen, C. (1998). *Developmental phonological disorders*. Melbourne: ACER Press.

Grunwell, P. (1997). *Natural phonology*. In M. Ball & R. Kent (Eds.), *The new phonologies*. San Diego, CA: Singular Publishing Group.



Speech Intelligibility – How Well Can Your Child Be Understood?

Intelligibility refers to how much of a child's speech a familiar listener (such as a parent) can understand. Based on Lynch et al., 1980 (cited in Bowen, 1998):

By 18 months	~25% intelligible to parents
By 24 months	50–75% intelligible to parents
By 36 months	75–100% intelligible to parents

▶ Red Flags for Speech Development – Referral may be recommended

- Failure to babble, or late onset of canonical babbling
- Repeated or chronic ear infections, grommet insertion, or hearing loss
- Glottal Replacement – missing the middle consonant (e.g., "wor-uh" for "water") when not dialectal
- Initial Consonant Deletion – e.g., "up" for "cup", "ee" for "tea/see/key"
- Small Phonetic Inventory – only uses a small range of sounds
- Vowel Errors
- Persisting Final Consonant Deletion past 3;3 years (e.g., "cu" for "cup")

💡 Encouraging Language & Literacy Development (Ages 3–5)

🤝 Be Connected

- Children learn language best through natural, meaningful interactions with adults, family, and friends.
- They thrive when they feel safe, connected, and understood.

😊 Follow Your Child's Lead

- Allow your child to guide conversations and activities by focusing on their interests.
- This encourages more meaningful and genuinely engaging interactions.

🗣️ Support Communication Attempts

- Give them space to try first, then gently interpret and verbalise what they're trying to say.
- Provide a clear model without asking them to repeat.
 - *Child reaches for a blue hat → "I want the blue hat" / "Blue hat!" / "Blue hat, please."*
- Adjust your model to match their current language level.

💭 Think Aloud

- Narrate your thinking out loud during everyday moments – this models reasoning, problem-solving, and vocabulary in real contexts your child understands. Pause after each thought to give your child space to jump in. If they don't respond, model a possible answer and keep going.
- During planning or problem-solving:
 - *"I'm planning a picnic tomorrow – I wonder what I'll need. Maybe...."*
- During play:
 - *"This block doesn't fit here. I'll try the other way... nope. Maybe I need a smaller one. Let me look through the box."*
 - You don't need a special teaching moment – just let your child hear your thinking, reasoning and problem solving.

Read with Your Child

Reading together is one of the most powerful things you can do for your child's language development. It builds vocabulary, listening skills, narrative understanding, and a love of literacy – all at once.

Make it Enjoyable & Interactive

- Show that reading is fun and a special time to connect – your enthusiasm is contagious.
- Follow your child's lead: focus on pictures or parts of the story that interest them, rather than reading every word.
- Let your child hold the book, turn the pages, and point to things they notice.

Ask Questions & Listen Actively

- Pause throughout to give your child chances to comment or share what they're thinking. Wait – don't rush to fill the silence.
- Mix up your question types:
 - Completion: "The cat sat on the..." (pause for child to fill in)
 - Recall: "What just happened to the bear?"
 - Open-ended: "What do you think will happen next?" / "Why do you think she's crying?"
 - Life connection: "Have you ever felt like that? When?"
- Expand on what they say: child says "dog!" → "Yes, a big fluffy dog – he looks excited!"

Build Vocabulary

- Pause on new words and explain simply: "Enormous – that means really, really big!"
- Point to pictures to connect new words to meaning. Revisit favourite books – repetition helps words stick.
- Talk about categories in pictures: "Can we find all the animals?" / "Can you name other fruits we know?"

Support Narrative & Thinking Skills

- Talk through event sequences: "First the egg cracked, then the chick came out – what happens next?"
- Discuss characters' feelings and reasons: "She looks worried. Why do you think she feels that way?"
- After finishing, briefly recap: "What happened in the story? Who was your favourite character?"

Explore Sounds & Phonological Awareness

- Choose rhyming books and emphasise rhyming words: "cat and hat, moon and spoon!" – pause for your child to supply the rhyme.
- Clap or tap out syllables in longer words: "di-no-saur" (3 claps) – make it playful.
- Point out words starting with the same sound: "sss-sun, sss-sea, sss-sock!" Focus on the sound, not the letter name.
 - e.g., say "sss" not "ess"; "c" not "see"

Print Awareness

- Occasionally run your finger under the words as you read to show that print carries the message.
- Point out familiar words or letters your child might recognise – their name, "Mum," "dog."
- Let your child "read" along for repeated or predictable phrases they've memorised.

Tips for Making it Work

- Even 10–15 minutes of shared reading a day makes a meaningful difference.
- Any book counts – board books, picture books, non-fiction, even catalogues or cookbooks!
- If your child wants to read the same book repeatedly, go with it – repetition deepens learning.
- Library visits are a wonderful way to explore books together without the cost.