

# How to Tell if Your Child is a Late Talker – And What to Do About It

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If you Google “18-month-old not talking”, you will find thousands of posts by concerned parents seeking advice about their late-talking toddler. Many of these parents, whose child seems to be developing typically in every other way, but who is late to talk, say that they are told not to worry, that someone in the family “didn’t talk until they were 3” or that “boys talk late”. Other parents say that their doctor has told them to wait until their child is at least two before seeking help. Often, parents’ gut instinct is to seek help, but it is confusing when doctors and family members tell them to “wait and see”. After all, wasn’t Einstein late to talk? This can be a very confusing situation for parents who want to do the best for their child.

The “wait-and-see” approach for children who talk late is a result of misconceptions about typical language development. While the commonly used phrase “All children develop at their own pace” is true to some extent, there are still important milestones which should be reached by a specific age. When these milestones are not reached, this becomes cause for concern. While some children seem to catch up on their own, others do not.

Let’s look at what the research tells us about the children we call Late Talkers. Note that in this case, we are not talking about children with physical or developmental delays such as Cerebral Palsy, Down Syndrome. Nor are we talking about autistic children, children with childhood apraxia (difficulty coordinating the muscles used to produce speech) or those who have a specific difficulty with understanding and producing language, known as “developmental language disorder.”

## Who Is a “Late Talker”?

A “Late Talker” is a toddler (typically between 18-30 months) who has limited spoken vocabulary for their age, while having a good understanding of language, typically developing play skills, motor skills, thinking skills, and social skills. The difficulty late talking children have is specifically with spoken or *expressive language*. This group of children can be very puzzling because they seem to have all of the building blocks for spoken language, yet they are late to use words and phrases to communicate.

Researchers have yet to agree upon an explanation for this specific delay. They have determined, though, that Late Talkers are more likely to have a family history of early language delay, to be male, and to have been born at less than 85% of their optimal birth weight or at less than 37 weeks gestation [1]. It has also been determined that approximately 13% of two-year-olds are late talkers [2].

## Important Language Milestones

The following guidelines can help you determine if your child’s vocabulary is appropriate for their age. If your child has not yet reached these milestones, they should be seen by a speech-language pathologist:

- 18-month-olds should use least 20 words, including different types of words, such as nouns (“baby”, “cookie”), verbs (“eat”, “go”), prepositions (“up”, “down”), adjectives (“hot”, “sleepy”), and social words (“hi”, “bye”).
- 24-month-olds should use 50 – 75 words and should combine 2 words together. These word combinations should be generated by the child, and not be combinations that are “memorized chunks” of language, such as “thank you”, “bye bye”, “all gone”, or “What’s that?”. Examples of true word combinations would be “doggie gone”, “eat cookie”, or “dirty hands”.

## Do Children Who Are Late Talkers Catch Up on Their Own?

Because this group of children is progressing so well in other areas of development, parents and others may assume that they will catch up on their own. Indeed, many late talkers do catch up on their own, but many do not.

## What Should You Do if Your Child Is a Late Talker?

If a toddler has a limited vocabulary for their age, The Hanen Centre recommends that you consult a speech-language pathologist. In addition, have your child’s hearing evaluated - even if you think they are hearing just fine, it is important to make sure they can hear sounds at a variety of volumes and pitches. Even slight hearing impairments can cause difficulties with speech and language development.

- Find a Hanen certified speech-language pathologist who is certified in the It Takes Two to Talk® Program to assess your child and provide support as needed.

## Other Helpful Resources

- ***It Takes Two to Talk* guidebook:** This practical guidebook gives you many research-based ideas for supporting your child’s language development during fun, everyday interactions with your child.
- **Additional article:** “Late Talkers... What We Know and What We Don’t”

## References

1. Ellis, E. & Thal, D. (2008). Early Language Delay and Risk for Language Impairment. *Perspectives on Language Learning and Education*, 15: 93-100.
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3. Rice, M. L., Taylor, C. L., & Zubrick, S.R. (2008). Language outcomes of 7-year-old children with or without a history of late language emergence at 24 months. *Journal of Speech, Language, and Hearing Research*, 51, 394-407.
4. Olswang, L.B., Rodriguez, B. & Timler, G. (1998). Recommending Intervention for Toddlers With Specific Language Learning Difficulties: We May Not Have All the Answers, But We Know a Lot. *American Journal of Speech Language Pathology*, 7, 23 – 32.

### About The Hanen Centre

*The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization committed to supporting all the important adults in young children’s lives to build the best possible social, language and literacy skills. This includes children with or at risk of language delays/disorders, autistic children, and children who may benefit from social communication support.*

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