



# Early Sentences — A Big Step in Language Development

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It's a major milestone in language development when children start to combine words, like “big bus”, “I want cookie”, or “come Mommy.” In the It Takes Two to Talk® guidebook <sup>[1]</sup> we refer to this as the “Combiner” Stage. This big step allows children to express more than one idea at a time, and it suddenly becomes easier to figure out what they're trying to tell us!

You might wonder how and when this happens, and how you can help your child build early sentences, especially if he has a language delay. Whether your child is typically developing or delayed in his language development, here are some answers to questions you may have about sentence development in young children.

## When do children usually start using sentences? When should I be concerned about my child's sentence development?

During their third year of life, children learn a lot about the rules of their language, and this allows them to start building sentences. A few things need to be in place in order for this to happen.

- Before children can start forming sentences, they need to be able to:
  - **say quite a few words** – you can't build a sentence if you only know a handful of words. Most 24 month olds can say at least 100 words, and the average 2 year old can say almost 300 words <sup>[2]</sup>.
  - **say at least a few verbs** – verbs are action words, like “sit”, “come”, and “go”, and they are one of the key building blocks for making sentences. Most 24 month olds can say at least a few verbs, and the average child at this age can say about 40 verbs <sup>[3]</sup>.

- **By 24 months, children begin combining two words together**, like “want cookie”, “more juice”, or “Daddy home”. While these “word combinations” aren’t quite sentences yet, they show us that children have figured out that they can string two ideas together with their words.
- **By 30 months, children start to use early sentences.** What makes an early sentence different from a word combination is that a sentence has to have (at a minimum) a subject and a verb. The subject is the person, place, thing, or idea that is doing something (“The dog is hungry”) or being something (“He likes ice cream”). In these examples, “is” and “likes” are the verbs.

When children start to use these early sentences, we know they are on the path towards adult-like sentences.

Subjects and verbs are the key building blocks for sentences in all languages [4]. In English, the subject usually comes before the verb.

An early sentence doesn’t have to have all of the correct grammar that an adult sentence has. In fact, an early sentence can be made up of only two words, like “Dog run” or “I sit”. Other examples of early sentences include: “He go down”, “Daddy wanna go”, and “It fly”. When children start to use these early sentences, we know they are on the path towards adult-like sentences.

Here are some typical things a child might say at this stage. Can you tell which ones are early sentences?

“I make mess”

“baby sit”

“He want cookie”

“Mommy come”

“go so fast”

“Mama up”

The first four are early sentences as they all have a subject and a verb. The last two statements are not sentences; they are word combinations. “Go so fast” has a verb (“go”) but it doesn’t have a subject. “Mama up” has a subject (“Mama”) but it doesn’t have a verb.

Children use both word combinations and early sentences during their third year while they are learning the rules of their language.

- **Sometimes children use memorized expressions.** There are certain expressions that are heard often and always said the same way, and this makes it easy for children to memorize them, such as “I did it!”, “here you go”, “I don’t know”, “yes please”, “thank you”, “no thanks”, etc. These expressions don’t necessarily tell

us how much children know about building sentences because they can copy and use these expressions without building them for themselves from words from their own vocabulary.

To summarize, during their third year, children use word combinations, memorized expressions, and early sentences as they continue to learn how to string words together according to the rules of their language. This process begins at around age 24 months, although it may happen later for children with delayed language development.

## When should I be concerned about my child's sentence development?

Sentence development begins with having a big enough vocabulary with enough variety of words to begin combining them together. So children are at risk for problems if they are:

- 24 months old and using less than 100 words
- 24 months old and using less than 2 verbs

Children are also at risk if they are:

- 24 months and not combining two words

Once children are combining words, they could be having problems with sentence development if they <sup>[4]</sup>:

- are 30 months old and not using at least two early sentences (that include a subject and a verb) within a 30 minute period of playing with a parent
- are using mostly memorized expressions and not building many of their own sentences

If you are concerned about your child's sentence development, talk to your doctor or a speech language pathologist.

## References

1. Weitzman, E. (2017). *It Takes Two to Talk® (5th ed.)*. Toronto, Ontario, Canada: The Hanen Centre.
2. Hadley, P. (2014). Approaching early grammatical intervention from a sentence-focused framework. *Language, Speech, and Hearing Services in Schools*, 45, 110-116.
3. Center for Child Language and the CDI Advisory Board. (2013). Cross Linguistic Lexical Norm website. <http://www.cdi-clex.org/>
4. Hadley, P. A., McKenna, M. M. & Rispoli, M. (2018). Sentence Diversity in Early Language Development: Recommendations for Target Selection and Progress Monitoring. *American Journal of Speech-Language Pathology*, 27, 553-565.

### About The Hanen Centre

*Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.*

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