

## Late Talking Toddlers



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**By what age should my  
child be talking?**



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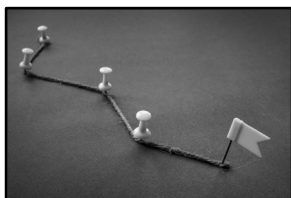
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While children develop at  
different rates, there are key  
milestones to watch for.



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By their 1st birthday, most children say their first words.



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By their 2nd birthday, most children:

- Say at least 50 words.
- Put 2 words together, such as “more food” or “Daddy go.”



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Two-year-olds won't pronounce every word perfectly.  
For example, if a child says “mo” for “more,” it still counts as a word.



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If children don't meet these milestones, they may need extra support.



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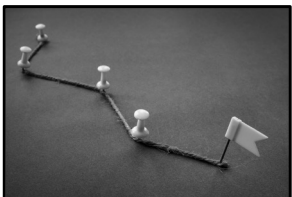
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There are ways you can help your child make progress. You're already doing the right thing by learning more.



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The focus of this video is toddlerhood. Older children have different language milestones. The following webpage has information about communication for children older than age 2:  
<https://www.asha.org/public/>



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## Who is considered a late talker?



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A late talker is a child around 2 or 3 years old who says fewer words than expected for their age. Late talkers don't have any other diagnoses that could explain a delay such as a hearing impairment or autism.



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Although late talkers **say** fewer words than their peers, many of them **understand** language well.



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For example, they may understand the **meaning** of "Go get your shoes," but they may not yet **say** the word "shoe."




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Not every late talker is the same.




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- Some late talkers **understand many** words. Others don't.
- Some may **try** to say words but have trouble making the speech sounds **correctly**.
- Some may **not yet try** to say words.




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While all toddlers have tantrums sometimes, research shows that late talkers may have more frequent and more intense tantrums. This can be challenging for your family life.

Manning et al., 2019

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This is why it's important to have a speech-language pathologist evaluate your child if you're concerned.



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**How common is late talking?**



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About 10-20% of children are late talkers. Boys are more likely than girls to be late talkers.

Collisson et al., 2016; Zubrick et al., 2007

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**What causes late talking?**

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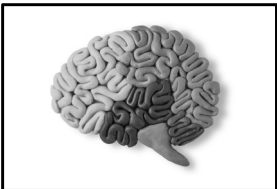
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The exact cause of late talking is unknown.

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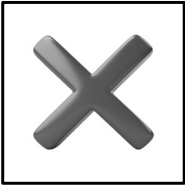
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It is **not** caused by:

- being bilingual,
- parenting style,
- personality, or
- a child's lack of motivation.



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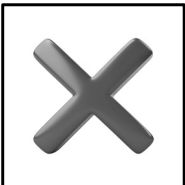
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Some parents may feel like it's their fault, but it's not.  
It's not the child's fault either.



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Late talking is likely due to brain-based differences in learning.  
This is clear, even if we don't know the exact cause of these differences yet.



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## Do late talkers eventually catch up?



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Some late talkers catch up. Others do not and may eventually be diagnosed with developmental language disorder or dyslexia when they are older.



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Sometimes, former late talkers will **appear** to have caught up, but then challenges appear when language gets harder in school, like when learning to read.



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Our latest work shows that around half of late talkers continue to have challenges when they are school-aged.



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Yet, some people still have the old idea that all late talkers 'grow out of it.' This is not true for most children.

Mettler, et al., submitted for publication  


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**Why is it important to act early?**



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Research shows the “wait-and-see” approach doesn’t work for many children.

Singh et al., 2018



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It’s important to seek help as early as possible.  
This is known as “early intervention.”



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Acting promptly helps your child build early skills.



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Skills build on skills:  
A child who can't say single  
words won't have words to  
combine, and then they won't  
be able to use more  
advanced grammar, etc.



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Early support helps set  
children up for successful  
communication as toddlers  
and as they grow.



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Also, your family may need  
help because it is difficult to  
parent a child who cannot  
clearly communicate their  
needs.  
The need is now, and that is  
important.



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**What should I do if I have concerns about my child?**



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If you're concerned, reach out to your child's primary care physician, your local early intervention program, or a speech-language pathologist (SLP).



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**What will a primary care physician do?**



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A black and white photograph showing a female doctor in a white lab coat with a stethoscope around her neck. She is holding a clipboard and looking at a woman who is sitting and holding a young child. They are in a clinical setting, possibly a doctor's office.

Talking to your child's doctor is a good first step if you're concerned about their communication.



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A black and white photograph showing a female doctor in a white lab coat with a stethoscope around her neck. She is holding a clipboard and looking at a woman who is sitting and holding a young child. They are in a clinical setting, possibly a doctor's office.

They'll check your child's overall development, including hearing and vision, since those can affect speech and language.



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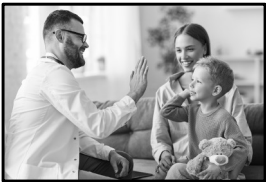
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A black and white photograph showing a male doctor in a white lab coat with a stethoscope around his neck. He is gesturing with his hand while talking to a woman who is sitting and holding a young child. They are in a clinical setting, possibly a doctor's office.

They can help rule out or identify any concerns and refer you to other specialists if needed.



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They can also give you information about your local early intervention program. Look for our handout on what to ask at your pediatrician's visit.



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## What's an "early intervention program"?



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In the United States, each state has its own early intervention program for children from birth to age 3 who have delays in communication, physical development, or other areas.



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These programs provide free evaluations of your child's development.



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If your child qualifies, they can receive services like speech-language therapy, physical therapy, or occupational therapy at little or no cost.



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To learn more and find your state's program, visit the CDC's Early Intervention webpage. ([www.cdc.gov](https://www.cdc.gov))



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If your child is 3 years of age or older, you can contact your public **school district** for the same kinds of help: a free evaluation of your child's development, and potentially free therapy to support their development.

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If your child qualifies for an early intervention program, they might work with a speech-language pathologist (SLP).

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If your child isn't eligible for an early intervention program, you can still seek support from an SLP. Visit ASHA's ProFind webpage to find a certified SLP near you: <https://find.asha.org/>

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## What will an SLP do?



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An SLP can fully assess all of your child's communication skills.



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They'll look at how your child understands and uses language, how they interact, and how they pronounce sounds.



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This often consists of playing with your child, asking them questions, asking them to follow certain directions, and asking you questions about their development.



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They will also let you know if you should seek information from other professionals, such as a physical or occupational therapist.



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**What if we have to wait for an appointment or services?**



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Sometimes there are long wait times for evaluations or services.  
This can be especially difficult for parents who are eager for answers and support.



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However, there are many things families can do in the meantime to support their child's development.



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Talk to your child about what they're doing.  
("Wow, you're stacking the blocks SO high!")



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Name and describe objects  
your child is looking at.  
("You have the red ball.")



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Look at books together and  
talk about the pictures.  
("The puppy is looking for  
his mom.")



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Sing simple, repetitive  
songs like "Patty Cake,"  
or "Old McDonald," or  
whatever songs are part of  
your family.



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Thanks for taking the time to learn about late talkers! If you know a toddler who isn't meeting their milestones, be sure to speak with a professional. Early intervention only works when it happens early!



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References

Collisson, B. A., Graham, S. A., Preston, J. L., Rose, M. S., McDonald, S., & Tough, S. (2016). Risk and protective factors for late talking: An epidemiologic investigation. *The Journal of Pediatrics*, 172, 168-174. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpeds.2016.02.020>

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