

GROWING UP

When Actions Speak Louder Than Words

By Dan Florell, Ph.D. & Praveena Salins, M.D.

The baby was babbling as usual until a precious word escaped his mouth, “Mama.” A baby’s first words are one of the major landmarks that parents remember about their child growing up. Babies typically start uttering their first words around 12 months of age.

A baby’s first words represent a new way for the baby to convey his wants and needs. Armed with language, a baby can let his parents know when he is hungry and when he does not want something. The gift of language means that the baby is less likely to get frustrated and parents will no longer need to try and guess why the baby is crying.

When toddlers have delayed language development, they end up relying on their behaviors to let others know what they want. Anyone who has played charades knows the frustration of trying to communicate with others without being able to talk. It is even more frustrating in charades as time passes by and people still don’t understand what is trying to be communicated. This is the type of situation toddlers find themselves in when they are behind on their language development.

The result is that toddlers start getting frustrated and start acting out. They may start throwing tantrums or throwing things. Parents will also start getting frustrated and not know what to do about the situation. It is very common for pediatricians and psychologists to see toddlers who are referred for problem behaviors to also have delays in their language development. This is why it is important to get toddlers help when their language is delayed.

While every toddler is different in his language development, there is a point where it is a cause for concern. If toddlers are not saying any words by 18 months of age or saying fewer than 50 words by 24 months, then parents should raise the issue with their pediatrician.

Another option for parents if they suspect a language delay is to call First Steps. First Steps is a government service that focuses on providing services to toddlers who have various developmental delays, including language. They can be contacted by calling (877) 417-8377. First Steps will then provide a free assessment and decide if a delay is present. If there is a delay, they will provide a speech specialist to work with the toddler.

The good news is that speech and language interventions are often successful in catching toddlers up with their peers, especially if the language deficit is detected early on. There are some cases where language delays are part of an overall developmental delay which will require intervention efforts beyond what a speech specialist can provide. Examples include toddlers with Down syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder, and cerebral palsy. Fortunately, a pediatrician and First Steps will also be able to help out in these situations.

If language delays are not addressed in a timely manner, a child can have a lifetime of difficulties. This can start off with difficulty communicating needs and wants as a toddler. Eventually it will have a negative impact on a child's academic performance and their ability to make friends. This impact continues into adolescence as teens with language delays often develop social and emotional difficulties.

Toddlers' use of language represents an important developmental milestone. Parents should be aware if their child is experiencing a delay and where to get the child help. Intervening early can prevent the development of behavioral issues in toddlers and lifelong difficulties.

Biography:

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