

## **Milestones of speech, language and communication development**

### **36 - 48 Months**

The rate of children's speech and language development can vary, depending on the child. Some children will develop certain skills quicker than others, and some children will be slow to develop certain skills compared to their peers, even if there are no related problems. This information sheet is just a general guideline, and many experts vary considerably on what they believe to be the normal stages of development.

You will see that many skills mentioned are repeated over several age groups as children are all different and some take longer to develop these abilities. So just use this chart as a very general guideline rather than read too much into it. There also may be some difference between boys and girls and when they develop certain skills.

To try and make this chart easier to read I have created a made-up child called Bill. Bill was lucky, he had a childhood free of any illness or accidents and he had proactive parents who played with him and gave him lots of quality 1:1 attention and play-time

The milestones information sheets focus on 6 areas of development:

- Speech and Auditory Awareness
- Expressive Language and semantics (content)
- Social use of Language (use and pragmatics)
- Receptive language (comprehension, perceiving and understanding) and cognition
- Morphology and syntax (structure)
- Gross and fine motor skills

During this period Bill acquires most of the speech sounds he will be using, and his sentences are expanding to 4 or 5 words. By 48 months his language is becoming much more complex and he can understand up to 2000 words.



## Speech and Auditory Awareness: 36 - 48 Months

Over this period Bill's sound inventory really starts to be completed and he produces most consonant sounds correctly. He is now able to use words with many different sounds - **m n p b t d w ng k g h f s y** with most other sounds and clusters developing over this year - **j l r sh ch z v sp st sk sl sm sn sw tr gr br pr cr fl bl pl gl**.

He is now using around a 1000 words and his speech is 90% understandable. His speech now includes final consonants e.g., hat duck, but he may still occasionally delete weak syllables, e.g. elephant becomes "efant".

There will be occasional repetitions or hesitations in "ma-ma-ma-mom" and this is common amongst many children. Bill's parents initially worry he may be acquiring a stammer, but many children experience a period of dysfluency and this sometimes happens because the demands to use language are greater than the capabilities to produce it. Most children overcome a dysfluent period and initially it is best not to worry and ignore it and give the child plenty of time to speak.

Bill's listening skills are also improving and he is able to sequence 3 pieces of information and should be able to listen and attend to a story for 15 minutes. His auditory memory also increases to 5 items by 48 months.

## Expressive Language and semantics (content): 36 - 48 Months

Bill is now easily using 4-5 word sentences and using words to relate observations, ideas and relationships. His vocabulary is expanding to 900 words by age 4 and he is holding conversations using many correct grammatical structures (plurals, possession, pronouns, prepositions and adjectives). Bill has also starting using "when" and "how" in questions, as well as "so" and "because". He is able to describe things more accurately and can tell you what certain objects are used for.

Bill is also be able to answer simple problem solving questions.



## **Social use of Language (use and pragmatics): 36 - 48 Months**

Bill can now hold centre stage and enjoys speaking without avoidance or embarrassment as his confidence and self esteem increase. He uses language as a complex tool, initiating, taking turns in conversation and maintaining topic, but can also easily adapt and change topic. Bill is also using language for many different reasons bargaining, obtaining information, expressing needs etc.

Bill is also starting to understand other peoples feelings and needs (empathy) and can respond appropriately.

His play skills are also developing, enjoying role play. He is currently in a period of play development referred to as symbolic play and is creating a world of pretend and make-believe play. During this period children start to use more imagination and start to identify one object as another, e.g. a brush becomes a boat. This play later develops into imitation and elaborate sequences where the child may take on the role of a doctor or a teacher. The child starts to become less self focussed and have more of an awareness outside themselves. By age four the child starts to show an interest in games that have rules and they will move away from parallel play to play that involves more social interaction. These rules are very much based around sensori-motor aspects of play which provide structure and repetition.

## **Receptive language (comprehension, perceiving and understanding) and cognition: 36 - 48 Months**

Bill's comprehension is now at a 3-4 word level, he can process complex sentence structures and understands 1500 2000 words. As he reaches 4-years old he can follow a command with 3 directions, can track a 6 word sentence and can retell a short story

Bill is making inferences and can understand the consequences of his and other people's actions. His understanding of concepts and how his world works becomes more developed over his 4<sup>th</sup> year of life he will learn to understand many more abstract concepts:

Concepts such as quality/texture/quantity/day/night/empty/full/same/different

Locational prepositions - next to

Comparatives - I am taller than you

Understands - odd one out, which one is missing

Concepts of "one," "many," "big," "little," "same," "different," "empty," "full," "clean," "dirty," etc.  
Concepts of time such as "night" and "day".

Understands difference in past/present and future

Answers "what is missing questions" and identifies objects missing from a scene

Understands day/morning/afternoon/night

Makes comparisons of speed and Weight

Attempts to answer problem solving questions "what if"

Bill can now sequence a 3-piece picture story, he will stay with one activity for eight or nine minutes and his concentration and attention skills have developed so he can sit and listen to a 15 minute story.



## **Morphology and syntax (structure): 36 - 48 Months**

Bill's understanding of more complex language is growing rapidly and is still ahead of his expressive language. He follows prepositional phrases such as "put the block under the chair" and follows two-part commands, e.g., "put the doll in the bed." He understands and uses plurals, e.g., "blocks," "dogs;" pronouns, e.g., "I, me, you, he, she, it, him, her;" and possessives, e.g., "girl's". In fact Bill holds conversations using many correct grammatical structures (plurals, possession, pronouns, prepositions, adjectives).

Bill's sentence length is increasing (averaging three to five word sentences) and he is able to retell a story or relate an idea to someone using short simple sentences.

He continues to ask lots of questions (e.g. "What + doing?", "Where?", "Who?", "When?", "How many?", "How?", "How much?") and is using "because" and "so" to join two sentences.

As he nears his 4<sup>th</sup> birthday Bill is using:

Pronouns - "his/her/their"

Irregular past tense

Possessives "mummy's hat"

Articles "a book/the book"

Regular past tense (-ed jumped)

He is more consistently using irregular and regular plurals

Negatives and some modals "shouldn't/won't/can't"

## **Gross and fine motor skills: 36 - 48 Months**

As Bill enters his 4<sup>th</sup> year he is growing in confidence and what he can do with his body. He is good at climbing ladders and trees and will try and climb up and over most things.

His balance is also improving and Bill can stand on one leg for 5 seconds and hop on the same leg. Bill is starting to take an interest in balls, although he does not understand any sporting rules, he throws and catches a ball and makes a good attempt at kicking a football.

His fine motor skills are also developing, he can draw simple objects a body with head, trunk, legs, arms and fingers. Bill can thread beads and button his shirt, but still has difficulty tying his laces. He washes and dries his hands before dinner.

*To learn more about child development, speech and language development, and what to do if your child has a speech and language delay visit our website [www.icommunicatetherapy.com](http://www.icommunicatetherapy.com).*



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## **Suggested Reading**

**The Wonder Years: Helping Your Baby and Young Child Successfully Negotiate The Major Developmental Milestones** by American Academy Of Pediatrics (Author), Tanya Remer Altmann

**Developing Child, The** by Helen Bee and Denise Boyd

**Milestones: Normal Speech And Language Development Across the Lifespan** by Jr., Ph.D. Oller, et al John W.

**Child Development** by Laura E. Berk

**Ages and Stages: A Parent's Guide to Normal Childhood Development** by Charles E. Schaefer and Theresa Foy DiGeronimo

**Child Development, Second Edition: A Practitioner's Guide (Social Work Practice with Children and Families)** by Douglas D Davies

**Child Development** by Robert S. Feldman

**What's Going on in There? : How the Brain and Mind Develop in the First Five Years of Life** by Lise Eliot

**Child Development: Principles and Perspectives** by J. Littlefield Cook & G. Cook

**Let's Talk Together - Home Activities for Early Speech & Language Development** by Amy Chouinard and Cory Poland

**Born to Talk: An Introduction to Speech and Language Development** by Lloyd M. Hult and Merle R. Howard

**Speaking, Listening and Understanding: Games for Young Children** by Catherine Delamain and Jill Spring

**Childhood Speech, Language & Listening Problems: What Every Parent Should Know** by Patricia McAleer Hamaguchi

**The Parents Guide to Speech and Language Problems** by Debbie Feit

**The Handbook of Child Language Disorders** by Richard G. Schwartz

**Does My Child Have a Speech Problem?** by Katherine L. Martin

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