

PEDIATRICS: Language Guidelines for Referral to Speech-Language Pathologists (SLPs)

Most Common Etiologies:

- Autism
- Developmental delay
- Fetal alcohol syndrome
- Hearing loss

Related Terms:

Agnosia, aphasia, apraxia of speech, babbling, developmental delay, echolalia, emotional lability, hemiparesis, hemiplegia, jargon, learning disabilities, paraphasia, perseveration, pragmatics, vocalization

Potential Consequences:

- Difficulty communicating basic needs (such as safety, pain, toileting, or hunger/thirst)
- Difficulty exchanging routine information (such as following directions or stating preferences)
- Difficulty functioning at level of independence expected for age (such as doing homework or household chores)
- Difficulty engaging in social interactions; risk for frustration or depression
- Difficulty meeting educational potential; loss of previous academic status
- Risk for personal injury due to communication limitations

Behaviors¹ That Should Trigger an SLP Referral

Receptive language

By 6 months* does not

- notice/startle to loud sounds
- look at the person speaking to him or her

By 12 months* does not

- respond to music or singing
- understand simple questions
- look at familiar people when named
- maintain eye contact with speaker or pay attention to speaker

By 2 years* does not

- identify basic body parts
- understand simple commands like “give me” without gestures
- demonstrate action words (e.g., *eat*)

By 4 years* does not

- understand comparisons
- make inferences

By 5 years* does not

- understand complex directions
- understand concepts

School-age receptive language/learning

- difficulty understanding teacher’s instructions and class discussion; following directions/rules; comprehending conversation and/or movies; differentiating between sound and/or words and relating them to meaningful information
- difficulty with reading comprehension across subjects, particularly abstract material with complex grammatical structure, and technical vocabulary; differentiating between letters and/or words and learning the meaning of visual symbols
- difficulty in mathematical reasoning, learning numbers, and/or understanding numeric concepts and applications

Receptive language with recent decline in function

- exhibits sudden or significant gradual loss in ability to understand and/or respond to oral and/or written language
- exhibits fluctuations in ability to understand and/or respond to language (e.g., 3-year-old may respond to simple questions most of the time but have difficulty during recurring periods of days or weeks)

¹Behaviors are clustered to indicate different levels of function and/or patterns commonly associated with different medical conditions or etiologies.

*Developmental age

Expressive language

By 6 months* does not

- laugh
- vocalize when talked to
- initiate vocalization with others or when alone

By 12 months* does not

- say “mama” or “dada”
- begin to imitate words
- say 1–2 words independently

By 2 years* does not

- refer to self by name
- speak using 1–2 words at a time (e.g., “Dan hat”)
- use new words frequently; use at least 50 words

By 2½ years* does not

- respond to hello and/or bye-bye consistently
- use short sentences (e.g., “Daddy go bye-bye”)
- name one color

By 3 years* does not

- relate experiences verbally
- state own first and last name
- count to 3

By 4 years* does not

- use short but grammatically correct sentences
- speak abstractly

By 5 years* does not

- use complex sentences
- explain how to do something
- respond to “why” questions with a reason

School-age expressive language/learning

- difficulty learning appropriate word production and usage, and relationships of words, phrases, and sentences to express needs/desires; may result in frustration or embarrassment
- difficulty with expression affects interactions with peers
- communication intent often misunderstood
- odd/unusual language
 - echolalia
 - delayed or no response to others
 - difficulty using pronouns appropriately
 - sounds that are not true words
 - immature or inappropriate language in comparison to peers
 - one-sided conversations with others
 - social isolation/severely reduced interest in communication
- difficulty in oral expression, including appropriate use of words, grammar, and underlying meaning of words to report information, express ideas, and draw conclusions and/or inferences; usually affects social communication, particularly the ability to effectively explain situations and experiences
- difficulty in written expression, including appropriate letter formation, word selection, spelling, grammar, and use of sentences and paragraphs to complete schoolwork
- difficulty in basic reading skills, including the ability to decode letters and words to attain information, draw inferences and conclusions, and make associations, in the school, home, and community
- difficulty with mathematical calculations, including reasoning to perform mathematical applications and equations, money management, measurement and projections, and/or calculations of time

Expressive language with recent decline in function

- sudden loss or significant gradual loss in production of spoken and/or written language

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