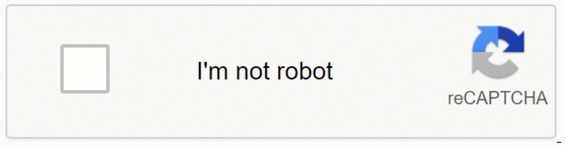

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What age do babies start speaking words

Babies make lots of communicative noises, but coos, gurgles, and cries aren’t true speech. When do babies say their first words? Most babies can say at least one or two words by the end of their first year. But studies suggest that some babies might start talking months earlier. For instance, experiments indicate that babies understand certain words — like the names of everyday objects — as early as 6 months. And around this same time, about half of all babies have begun babbling in ways that sound very speech-like. So it’s possible that some babies are intentionally speaking by the age of 6 months — putting together simple syllables (like “ba ba”) to express a concrete meaning (like “bottle”). And according to survey of more than 1500 parents, more than 50% of babies are speaking their first words by 10 months postpartum (Schneider et al 2015). This same survey found that about 25% of babies still hadn’t spoken by their first birthdays. And by 14 months, most babies will experience a rapid increase in their ability to comprehend and produce speech. Here are the details about when babies start talking — and what to look for if you’re concerned about developmental delays. The emergence of “canonical babbling” — when babies practice speaking syllables like “ma ma ma“ From birth onwards, babies make a variety of vocal sounds. But it isn’t until around 4-10 months that babies begin repeating sounds that we recognize as true speech syllables — syllables that include both a consonant and a vowel, like “ma ma ma” or “ba ba ba” (Oller et al 2001; Oller et al 1998). This is called canonical babbling, and it’s a precursor to speech. Babies are practicing the pronunciation of syllables that will become the building blocks of true words. But where do we draw the line between babbling and a baby’s first words? When children are learning to talk, their pronunciation is far from perfect. They do their best to approximate the sounds they hear, and the results might sound like babbling, even though they intend their sounds to function as real words. For example, what if your baby consistently says “ba ba” when she’s given a bottle? Maybe she is deliberately and intentionally trying to say “bottle.” If so, that’s a word — albeit an imperfectly pronounced one. So the question, “when do babies say their first words?” depends not only on the sounds they make, but on whether or not babies have figured out what the sounds are supposed to mean. How early do babies crack the code? Evidence that even 6-month-old infants can understand certain words Researchers have designed a clever way to test word comprehension in babies. First, babies sit on their mothers’ laps while facing an electronic screen. Then a series of images are presented to the babies — images of everyday items. The mothers are blindfolded, so they can’t know what, exactly, their babies can see. But the mothers wear earphones so they can receive instructions from experimenters about what to tell their babies. With each trial, multiple items appear simultaneously at different locations on the screen. And the mothers are told to say something — to repeat back a phrase or question that singles out one object by name. For example, if the screen displays two items — a nose on the left and a spoon on the right — the mother might be told to say, “Do you see the spoon?” How do babies react? Researchers have consistently found that babies as young as 6 months tend to look more at the items their mothers speak about. They appear to understand many words, including the names of their parents (e.g., “Mama” and “Daddy”), as well words that refer body parts and food (Tinkoff and Jusczyk 1999; Tinkoff and Jusczyk 2012; Bergelson and Swingley 2012; Bergelson and Swingley 2015; Bergelson and Aslin 2017). As you would expect, babies are more likely to have learned the meaning of words that their parents have used in conversation with them every day. And some situations may be especially conducive to learning. For instance, during meal times, caregivers typically interact with their babies face to face, and they may repeat certain key words (like the names of utensils and food items) again and again. This makes it easier for babies to figure out what parents are trying to communicate. So if your baby seems to understand what the word “bottle” means, and says something like “ba ba“ to request his bottle, it’s not unreasonable to think he’s making use of a genuine word. But if your baby isn’t speaking yet, when should you worry? Researchers emphasize that it’s normal for babies to vary quite a bit in the timing of their speech milestones. As noted above, a recent survey suggests that approximately 25% of babies haven’t spoken their first words by the age of 12 months. But there are guidelines for identifying children that seem to be developing more slowly than normal. Late onset of canonical babbling As noted above, canonical babbling typically emerges between 4 and 10 months. Babies who don’t show signs of canonical babbling by the end of this period may be at risk for future language problems (Lomander et al 2017). So if you aren’t hearing those syllables by 9 months, this is something you’ll want to monitor. Talk to your pediatrician about your concerns. No words by 13 months Throughout the world, infants are typically speaking their first words by 11-13 months, and research suggests that most babies show major improvements in their ability to understand speech by 14 months (Bergelson and Swingley 2012). So if your baby is approaching 14 months and still hasn’t spoken any words, consult with your pediatrician. Timely intervention can get children back on track When babies lag behind, that doesn’t always mean that something is wrong. But if there is an underlying problem, it’s best to identify it early in development. Modern speech therapists have developed effective interventions for children with speech delays, and the earlier children begin, the sooner children will catch up. More reading Babies need our help learning language. Like adults who learn to speak a foreign language, babies benefit from being included in conversation. For more information about the power of one-on-one communication in teaching babies to understand and speak words, see this article. References: When do babies say their first words? Bergelson E and Swingley D. 2015. Early Word Comprehension in Infants: Replication and Extension. Lang Learn Dev. 11(4):369-380. Bergelson E and Swingley D. 2012. At 6-9 months, human infants know the meanings of many common nouns. Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A. 109(9):3253-8 Bergelson E and Aslin RN. 2017.Nature and origins of the lexicon in 6-mo-olds. Proc Natl Acad Sci U S A. 114(49):12916-12921. 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Noelle, DC, R. Dale, A. S. Warlaumont, T. Matlock, C. D. Jennigs, and P. P. Maglio (eds): Proceedings of the 37th Annual Conference of the Cognitive Science Society, 2210–2115. Syrnyk C and Meints K. 2017. Bye-bye mummy – Word comprehension in 9-month-old infants. Br J Dev Psychol. 35(2):202-217. Content of “When do babies say their first words” last modified 3/2018 image of siblings by istock / Golfcuk Image of experimental slide derived from images provided in a PLoS One paper by Bergelson and Swingely: Bergelson E and Swingley D. 2013. Young toddlers’ word comprehension is flexible and efficient. PLoS One. 8(8):e73359. This isn’t the same paper cited in the article above, but the images in it are highly similar to those that the authors used in their 2012 study of 6-9 month old infants. The imagery from the 2013 paper is copyright © 2013 Bergelson, Swingley and available under the Creative Commons Attribution License. Your baby’s communication skills grow a lot in their first year of life. Your baby learns how to express themselves, respond to you, and understand when you communicate with them. All this happens before your baby says their first real words, which is around their first birthday.Expressing: baby language developmentAs part of language development in the first year, your baby will express themselves in many ways.At 3-4 months, your baby might:make eye contact with yousay ‘ah goo’ or another combination of vowels and consonantsbabble and combine vowels and consonants, like ‘ga ga ga ga’, ‘ba ba ba ba’, ‘ma ma ma ma’ and ‘da da da da’.At 5-7 months, your baby might:copy some of the sounds you make, like coughing, laughing, clicking or making ‘raspberries’copy some of the gestures you make, like waving, pointing or clappingplay with making different sounds, like ‘aaieee’, ‘booo’ and ‘ahh’ at different pitches and volumes.At 8-9 months, your baby might:put sounds together with rhythm and tone, in ways that sound like normal speech – this is sometimes called the ‘jargon phase’ and might continue when first words beginsay ‘mama’ or ‘dada’, although they might not know what these mean yet.At 10-11 months, your baby might:communicate using noises or gestures, with the aim of asking for something, saying no to something, insisting on something, or greeting someoneask for something by pointing, or by looking at a person then at something they want.By around 12-14 months, your baby might say a few words and know what they mean, like ‘mama’ or ‘dada’ to refer to mum or dad.Responding: baby language developmentIn these months, your baby will respond to you in many ways. For example, your baby might:make sounds, look excited or go quiet when you talk with them or say their namecoo and laugh – for example, while you’re changing their nappysmile and laugh when you play with themenjoy games like peekaboo and other action gamesuse gestures like waving or pointingrespond to their own name by looking, widening their eyes, listening or smiling.Understanding: baby language developmentYour baby is listening and learning all the time. This helps baby understand their world.For example, in these months, you might find that your baby understands:the word ‘no’ at around 10 months – although they won’t always do as you saysvery simple instructions with verbal and visual cues – for example, at around 12 months, when you hold your hand out and say ‘for daddy’, they’ll give you the toy they’re holding.Children learn new skills over time and at different ages. Most children develop skills in the same order, and each new skill they learn builds on the last. Small differences in when children develop skills are usually nothing to worry about. But if something about your child’s language development worries you, it’s a very good idea to talk with your child and family health nurse, GP or paediatrician.

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