

# At what age do autistic children talk?



A child's first words or even noises can be one of the most exciting parts of parenthood. Those of us with children probably have very fond memories of the first time we heard "mummy" or "daddy", or a variation of one of these, from our children. So when a child does not start to speak when expected, it can be a huge worry for parents.

A child's first words tend to appear at around the age of about 12 months, but up to 10% of toddlers reach this age without even saying 'mummy' or 'daddy'. Sometimes it can be thought that these children are autistic, but this is not necessarily the reason for a lack of speech.

Other reasons could be hearing loss, intellectual disability, a language disorder or a speech disorder. It could also be a passing developmental stage, which the child will grow out of in time and which will have no lasting damaging effects on the child.

A lack of communication skills can be one of the early signs of autism that many parents notice and talk to their doctor about when they are concerned with their child's lack of development. If a child is autistic, then it is really important that an accurate diagnosis is made as early as possible to ensure they get the right treatment and support.

Studies completed on late speaking children have shown that up to 70% of children who are not talking at up to 18 months of age are neither autistic nor have any other developmental issues. On the other hand, it is important to remember that this means that 30% of the children will have an intellectual disability, language disorder, speech disorder or some other condition which will require treatment. Therefore, no parent of a non-talking child should assume that their child will simply begin to talk one day, but nor should they worry that there is a serious problem – there are many possible reasons.



## How does autism affect communication?

Being autistic means that the brain works differently – you can think of it as being wired in another way. A brain that works differently affects everything that the brain is used for, including communication. In addition, all autistic people are different – there is no such thing as a typical case of autism, though there are some common traits. So some autistic people may be extremely eloquent and have very few if any difficulties with communicating, whereas others may really struggle with verbal communication.

Some autistic children do find it harder than other children to learn to talk. One theory as to why this happens is that autistic babies may focus their attention more on things around them and less on people, so they see fewer examples of language skills to copy. They may feel less need to communicate or interact with others, so again they have less need to develop their language skills as quickly as other children.



As described above, there can be many possible reasons for a child being slow to develop their language skills, not just autism. Some signs that a child is autistic rather than just having speech difficulties include:

- Difficulty in understanding simple directions or questions
- Having difficulty in communicating their desires and needs
- Repeating the same words and phrases over and over again
- Responding to questions by repeating the question rather than answering it
- Speaking in an abnormal tone of voice, or with an odd rhythm or pitch
- Taking what is said literally and missing humour or sarcasm triggers

Some of these signs may be more obvious than other according to the child themselves and their age.



## The difference between verbal and non-verbal autism

Non-verbal autism is where an autistic child does not develop speech and language communication skills in the same way and at the same rate as other children of the same age.

Up to half of all autistic children exhibit speech delay, so it is not an unknown condition and you are not alone as a parent in facing the challenges of helping a non-verbal child and wondering when your autistic child will start talking.

However, it is important to remember that definitions are just words – we are all different with different strengths and weaknesses. Whether your autistic child has some language skills or does not speak at all, the important thing is they receive the specific help and support they need to thrive. The very fact that you are reading a resource like this shows that you want to give them this support.



## **The age a child with verbal autism will talk**

A child with verbal autism (difficulties with speaking but not a near-total absence of sounds and words) may still take longer to develop their language skills than other children.

If you feel your child is late to start talking then you should discuss it with their doctor as soon as you can in order to rule out any medical conditions that may be causing this.

You could also ask for help from a Speech Language Pathologist who have undertaken special training on how young children learn to talk and look at augmentative communication apps as well.

If your child is referred for an autism test, then it is important to make sure that a diagnosis is given rather than just determining whether your toddler show signs of autism or not. This is because many toddlers throw tantrums, ignore their parents, and refuse to respond to questions – whether they are autistic or not.

The question as to what age an autistic child will learn to talk is hard to answer. All children are different.

However, there are steps you can take to help them on their way. Helping an autistic child to communicate is made easier if you make the activities play based, positive and nurturing.

Encouraging play and social interaction gives you lots of enjoyable opportunities to communicate with your child. You should make sure that you are at eye level with your child and in front of them as much as you can, so that they can see you and copy what you are doing.

Another way to help your child to communicate is to imitate them in a positive way. This encourages your child to copy you and take turns at vocalising and interacting with you. You can also focus on non-verbal communication such as eye contact and gestures in an exaggerated way. You should try and use both your body and your voice when you are communicating with them, in a way that will be easy for your child to replicate. Try and make sure you are responding to your child's gestures as well, for example, when they pass you a toy.





You should try and keep your language as simple as possible too as this will help your child feel confident in imitating your speech. You could start with single words, such as 'ball' and 'roll' and then once your child has picked these up start linking words together, such as 'roll ball'.

Once your child has picked up how to string two words together, then add another word to make a three-word phrase, and so on and so on. It is also important to remember that your child also needs time to communicate as well - if you are always talking for them and not leaving them time to answer questions then they are not going to do it for themselves. Give them the opportunity to respond and watch for any sound or body movement.

You could think about how to encourage communication with your child without interrupting their flow in what they are doing. As with the one word, then two-word example above, think about narrating what they are doing such as saying car and holding their toy car up. By talking about the things that your child is interested in, you will be encouraging them to learn the vocabulary.

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Assistive technology such as app2vox can also be a great help as well. They do not take the place of speech but encourage the development of speech while assisting the child to learn new words.

app2vox, for example, contains pictures that your child touches to produce words, which they can then imitate. They can also use the app to put words together in a sentence to help them communicate their wants and needs in a less-frustrating way than normal.



## **Signs your child is non-verbal**

When your child is very young, you may be unable to tell whether they are slow to acquire language skills or are non-verbal.

As described above, many children are slow to learn to speak and this is nothing to worry about in itself. But if your child continues to make little or no progress in developing speech it may well be that they are non-verbal. The best way to know for sure is to seek advice from your doctor, as you should do for any concerns about your child's health or development.

In the past it was believed that if a child was diagnosed as being non-verbal after the age of 4, that they would never speak. However, a study in 2013 by the American Academy of Paediatrics showed that this was simply not the case. The study was based on 500 children and the conclusion that they came to was that non-verbal children can potentially be taught to speak at any age, with some of the children who were studied learning how to communicate fluently as late as in their teenage years.

This means that if your child is diagnosed as being non-verbal then you should not be resigned to the fact that you will be communicating by non-verbal methods forever.

New breakthroughs in research have shown that you can use non-verbal methods of communication, such as specially designed apps, as a way to begin encouraging your child to start using words while you develop other effective strategies for knowing what it is that they want and need.



## What to do if your child has non-verbal autism

Firstly, do not worry or be upset. Think how often you communicate by email, text, instant messenger and even things like waving across a room or just a look! There are more alternative methods of communication available to us today than ever before.

There are some tried and tested strategies that parents can use to try and get through to a non-verbal child, and more importantly that may allow the child to be able to convey their wants and desires to their parents. In all likelihood some will work better for you than others, and you need to find which are most effective for you and your child. Remember, you are not alone, and you can do this.

Ideas to try include speaking face to face with your child, using sign language, teaching your child to point, using toys and utilising assistive devices.

