Can My Child Understand Me?

A Parent's Guide to Receptive and Expressive Language Development



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1. Why This Guide Matters

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Many children speak late or struggle to follow instructions—but not all language delays are obvious. This guide helps you understand if your child is developing communication skills on time and how you can support them early.

2. Understanding Receptive vs Expressive Language

- Receptive language is the ability to understand what others say.
- Expressive language is the ability to use words, sentences, gestures to express oneself.
Both are equally important. A child may understand everything but still speak very little.

3. What to Expect by Age

By 1 Year:
- Responds to name, understands 'no', uses gestures

By 2 Years:
- Follows simple instructions, uses 2-word phrases

By 3 Years:
- Understands simple questions, uses 3-4 word sentences

By 4 Years:
- Understands most daily language, tells short stories

By 5 Years:
- Understands longer instructions, uses detailed sentences and connects ideas

4. Signs of Language Delay

- Doesn’t respond to name
- Struggles to follow age-appropriate instructions
- Uses very few words by age 2
- Doesn’t ask or answer simple questions
- Repeats words but doesn’t use them meaningfully

5. Why Language Delays Happen

- Limited interaction or screen time replacing conversation
- Hearing issues

- Developmental conditions (e.g., Autism, ADHD)
- Delayed exposure to spoken language
- Oral motor or cognitive delays

6. Simple Checks Parents Can Do

- Give one-step and two-step instructions and observe the response
- Ask 'Where is your nose?' or 'Show me the ball'
- Watch how your child responds to questions and names of objects
- Track how many new words they use weekly

7. Everyday Activities to Build Language

- Name objects during play or daily routines
- Ask open-ended questions
- Describe what you're doing (“Now I’m cutting the apple”)
- Use picture books to talk, not just read
- Wait and give your child time to respond

8. Common Mistakes Parents Make

- Using too much baby talk or only yes/no questions
- Asking 'Say this' constantly
- Giving phones instead of real conversations
- Not giving enough wait-time to respond
- Comparing to other children constantly

9. When Should You Be Concerned?

- No meaningful words by 18 months
- Doesn’t follow simple instructions by 2
- Struggles to form short sentences by 3
- Poor understanding of everyday language by 4
- Difficulty answering 'what', 'where', or 'who' questions

10. What Professionals Can Do

- Assess both receptive and expressive language levels
- Identify specific areas of difficulty
- Provide play-based or structured therapy plans

- Involve parents with home strategies
- Track progress through milestones

11. Supporting Your Child Emotionally

- Never shame or rush them to speak
- Encourage all communication (gestures, pointing)
- Celebrate progress, no matter how small
- Let them lead play and follow their interest to build language naturally

12. Final Words for Parents

Language grows through connection. Your time, your words, and your patience are your child's greatest tools. Trust your instincts, ask questions early, and remember: helping a child communicate is helping them thrive.