

By Jennifer Peters-Lee

Detecting Language Delay

**“When all is said and done, more is said than done”
- Aesop**

Infants are born with an innate ability to learn language. It is a natural process. No matter what language caregivers speak, children learn language much in the same manner. First they acquire sounds, then first words and then they begin to combine these words into phrases. The rate of acquisition, however, is individual and may vary from child to child. Often, professionals refer to an acceptable range of ability for a given chronological age. In the event that a child has the misfortune to miss a language development milestone, he/she is regarded as having a language delay.

To be able to detect a language delay, it is important to understand how the condition presents itself. Typically, children with a language delay will have difficulties in the following areas:

- ▶ **Producing their first words and/or learning words which will form the basis of their understanding of language being directed to them**
- ▶ **Being able to string words together to make a meaningful sentence that delivers a message**
- ▶ **Acquiring words towards building their vocabulary**
- ▶ **Have difficulty understanding words or sentences directed to them**

While language delay is often associated with conditions like Hearing Impairment, Down Syndrome, Autism Spectrum Disorder etc., it can also occur in the absence of a prevailing condition.

Now, a ‘language delay’ is different from a ‘speech disorder’ or a ‘language disorder’. A child who understands language, knows what to say and is able to string words together appropriately but has difficulties pronouncing the sounds within the words, would have



a ‘speech disorder’. In contrast to this, if a child has significant delays in learning to talk and understanding language and if these difficulties do not seem to get resolved despite receiving help, this may be a sign of a language disorder. Children with speech disorders may not have a language delay. Unfortunately, there may be some children who have both difficulties.

As mentioned earlier, children develop at different rates. So how do parents know when to get help? Comparing your child to another of the same age may not be helpful in identifying whether there is a problem to be dealt with or not. In such a situation, it is better to err on the side of caution and seek professional advice.

As a rule of thumb, if you notice any of the following signs in your child, do consult a speech-language therapist.

* By 12 months

Your child should be able to communicate with you using sounds, gestures and/or words when help is needed or when an item is desired. If this is not occurring in your child, seek help.

* By 2 years

Your child should be able to say about 50 different words at the minimum. Some children start to combine two or more words together - 'all gone', 'car go' etc. Most two year olds produce words spontaneously. If you notice that your child is producing words but only in imitation of another, or if your child does not seem to understand simple instructions and/or questions, do seek help.

* By 3 years

Your child should be able to combine words into longer phrases - 'want more drink'- and should be able to easily understand simple functional language (What do you want to eat for breakfast?). A typical 3 year old is also usually full of questions. If you do not notice these signs, do seek help.

* At any age

If your child has been diagnosed with a condition such as a hearing loss, developmental delay or syndrome (Autism, Down Syndrome etc.) your child will be in the high risk group and a consultation with a speech-language therapist is highly recommended. An early consultation and receiving supportive therapy as soon as possible, is essential in the effective process of remediation.

Typically, a speech-language evaluation will try to ascertain the level at which your child is able to understand and use language. The assessment will be made via questions to you, observing the child interact with you, observing the child play and via



direct interactions with the child. If a language delay is suspected, the speech-language therapist might suggest therapy sessions.

If you require the services of a speech-language therapist, you can find a list of professionals on The Malaysian Association of Speech-Language and Hearing (MASH) website www.mash.org.my. 



Jennifer Peters-Lee is a Consultant Speech-Language Pathologist who has made meaningful communication, her life's work. If you have any questions, contact her at jennifer@carespeech.com