

Speech and Language Therapy

Helping Your Child Understand

Children learn to understand words and sentences over time. This starts when they are babies. For example, they may hear the word “bath” every time the taps are turned on. After hearing it many times, they start to understand what it means.

Children need to hear words many times in different places and situations before they understand them well. As they grow, they understand more words and longer sentences.

In typical development:

- **By 5 years old**, most children understand words like “first” and “next.” For example, “First we wash the dishes, then we go to Nana’s.” They also understand words about place, like “above,” “below,” and “between.”
- **By 7 years old**, children can usually follow instructions with a few steps. For example, “Put your Lego away, go upstairs, and find your swimming things.” They may also know that different words can mean the same thing, like “minus,” “subtract,” and “take away.”
- **By 9 years old**, many children understand words that compare things, like time or size. For example, “That is the longest one,” or “We got here earlier than yesterday.”
- **By 11 years old**, most children understand longer sentences with lots of information. For example, “Get the black pen from the box under my bed and check if it works.” They also start to understand jokes, humour, and sarcasm.

(Speech and Language UK, 2026)

You can help your child understand by:

- **Using simple words and short sentences**
Break long instructions into smaller parts. For example, instead of saying, “Put your shoes and coat on and get your bag,” say, “Get your shoes...coat...bag.” Pause between each key word.
- **Speaking slowly and giving them time to think**
Talk a little slower and leave small pauses. This gives your child time to understand. After giving an instruction, try counting to 6 in your head. If they don’t respond, repeat it again or cue them in another way.
- **Showing them what you mean**
Use objects, pictures, pointing, or actions. For example, if they do not understand “Get your bottle,” point to where the bottle is. If they do not understand “bath time,” show them their rubber duck bath toy.

- **Keeping routines the same**

Children learn better with routines. Using the same words in the routines each time helps them understand. Toothbrushing routine example: Start the routine in the same way each time (put the toothpaste on the toothbrush and say 'teeth time'), use the same words during the routine (brush, brush, brush), end the routine in the same way (rinse the toothbrush and say 'teeth finished').

- **Talking face to face and reducing noise**

Being face to face with your child helps your child watch your face and see how words are made. It also helps them see your facial expression and body language which they can use to help them understand your message. Turn off the TV or reduce background noise so they can listen and pay attention better.

- **Repeating important words**

When you talk to your child, repeat the most important words for their understanding. For example, "Give me the ball... **ball**." "Put your shoes on... **shoes on**". "After school we're going to the supermarket then Grandma's... **supermarket** then **Grandma's**."

Remember to praise your child when they listen or try to answer, even if they do not get it right.

Reference: Speech and Language UK, (2026), *How do children develop skills in understanding words and sentences?* Available in: Support your primary-age child's understanding of words and sentences

If you have any comments about this leaflet or the service you have received you can contact :

Children's Therapies
Broad Street Plaza
Halifax
Telephone 01422 261340

www.cht.nhs.uk

If you would like this information in another format or language contact the above.

Potřebujete-li tyto informace v jiném formátu nebo jazyce, obraťte se prosím na výše uvedené oddělení

Jeżeli są Państwo zainteresowani otrzymaniem tych informacji w innym formacie lub wersji językowej, prosimy skontaktować się z nami, korzystając z ww. danych kontaktowych

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