

Developmental Milestones

Two to Three Years

by Natalie J. Dahl, M.S., CCC-SLP



In a child's third year of life, speech and language skills are growing exponentially, and social skills are starting to emerge. The child understands and uses most simple words and begins using specific grammar structures, such as verb phrases, prepositional phrases, and WH-questions. At this age, the child will also show interest in playing with others and playing with toys more appropriately.

The following lists show behaviors that a child will probably exhibit throughout his or her third year of life. Every child is unique, and these lists should be used as a general guide. If a child is not meeting the developmental milestones listed below, it is recommended to consult a speech-language pathologist to determine further action.

Two to Three Years: Receptive Language (Hearing/Understanding)

- Understands approximately 900 words
- Understands opposites, such as go/ stop, big/little, and up/down
- Follows 2-step directions, such as "get the cup and put it in the sink"
- Quickly learns new words
- Understands my/your, such as "Where's my nose? Where's your nose?"
- Can find an object you describe by function from a group of 3-4 common objects. For example, "Which one do you eat?" (choices are an apple, a ball, a book, a car).
- Answers simple who, where, and what questions about common knowledge or books
- Understands prepositions, such as in, on, and under
- Understands simple category words, such as "Can you find a food or animal?"

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Two to Three Years: Expressive Speech and Language (Speaking)

- Uses approximately 500 words; has a word for almost everything
- Uses m, p, b, h, y, k, g, f, t, d, and n in words
- Speech is understandable 50-70% of the time
- Uses 2- or 3-word phrases
- Sometimes “stutters” when excited, by repeating words, such as “I can-I can-I can play now?”
- Uses prepositions, such as in, on, and under
- Talks about things that are not in the room
- Asks “Why?”
- Begins to ask yes/no questions, such as “It fast?”
- Begins to use auxiliary verbs, such as “Car is blue.”
- Begins to use past tense verbs (sometimes inappropriately), such as walked, runned

Two to Three Years: Social Language

- Usually engages in eye contact during conversation with familiar people
- Uses words to see information, express frustration, to clarify, and to make observations; less temper tantrums and crying
- Wants to show you things and get your attention frequently
- Prefers to play with others and seeks them out when available
- Engages in parallel play around age 2 (side-by-side play, watching, copying)
- Engages in interactive play around age 3; uses toys imaginatively instead of throwing or stacking them

Resources: