



# Two “Childs” Diverged: En Route Towards (A)typical Language Development

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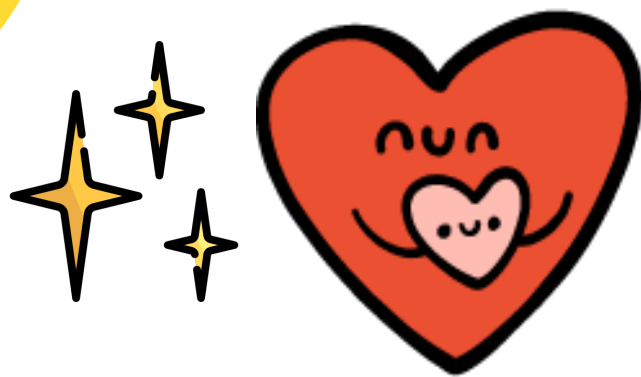
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PART ONE

# Foreword



## Foreword



Dear Parents,

Some of you are beginning to embark on the exciting journey of parenting, while the rest of you are already celebrating many first milestones. From witnessing your child taking his or her first steps, to hearing his or her first words – the joys of parenting are endless, albeit challenging at times.

One of the most remarkable discoveries in infancy is the emergence of babbling, because it would not be long before your child is able to utter one or two words at a time, and eventually producing complex sentences by the age of five. This is indeed a very curious phenomenon, and you may be wondering, what are the milestones in typical language development? Should I be worried if my child is making mistakes in language? What are the early signs of atypical language development? When is intervention required and where can I seek help? How can I help to nurture my child's language development?

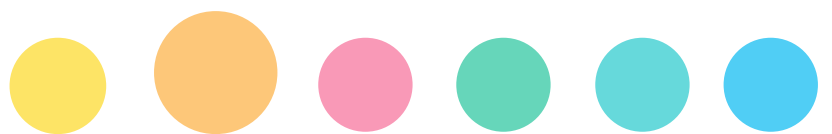
To help you explore those questions, this booklet aims to address some of the concerns surrounding typical and atypical language development in the context of Singapore. As you can tell from the title, young children often make similar mistakes in the process of developing language, such as expressing the plural of “child” as “childs” instead of “children”. Would that be considered as a form of language impairment, or is that a regular phase that most, if not all children go through? From the discussion, you will be better equipped with knowledge on how to identify typical learning trajectories and early signs of atypical language development. On top of that, suggestions on how to seek intervention for possible language disorders are provided, should you require clinical diagnosis and further assistance. Last but not least, you may wish to try out some of the few engaging activities that are included at the end of this booklet, which would greatly encourage parent-child interaction.

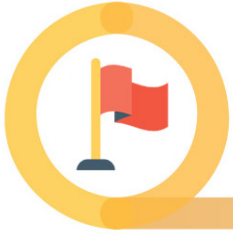
Before you proceed to read the rest of this booklet, I would like to thank you for being a part of your child's language development, because your input is invaluable to them. I hope that you will find this information helpful along the way and that it will make your parenting experience more rewarding down the road.

Sincerely,  
Glenn Ho

# PART TWO

# Milestones in Typical Language Development





## QUESTION ONE

What are the milestones in typical language development?

From infants to toddlers and preschoolers, children rapidly develop language and become competent speakers of their native language over the first few years of life. Given the unique linguistic landscape in Singapore, many children grow up as simultaneous bilinguals, which means that they are exposed to two languages from birth and/or use two languages on a daily basis at home [1]. While it may seem as though they are progressing spontaneously from blurting out incoherent utterances to forming actual words between their two languages, most of them go through similar developmental phases at the same time as monolingual children who grow up learning only one language [2].

Some of these typical language learning trajectories include:

**4 Months**

Canonical Babbling

**24 Months**

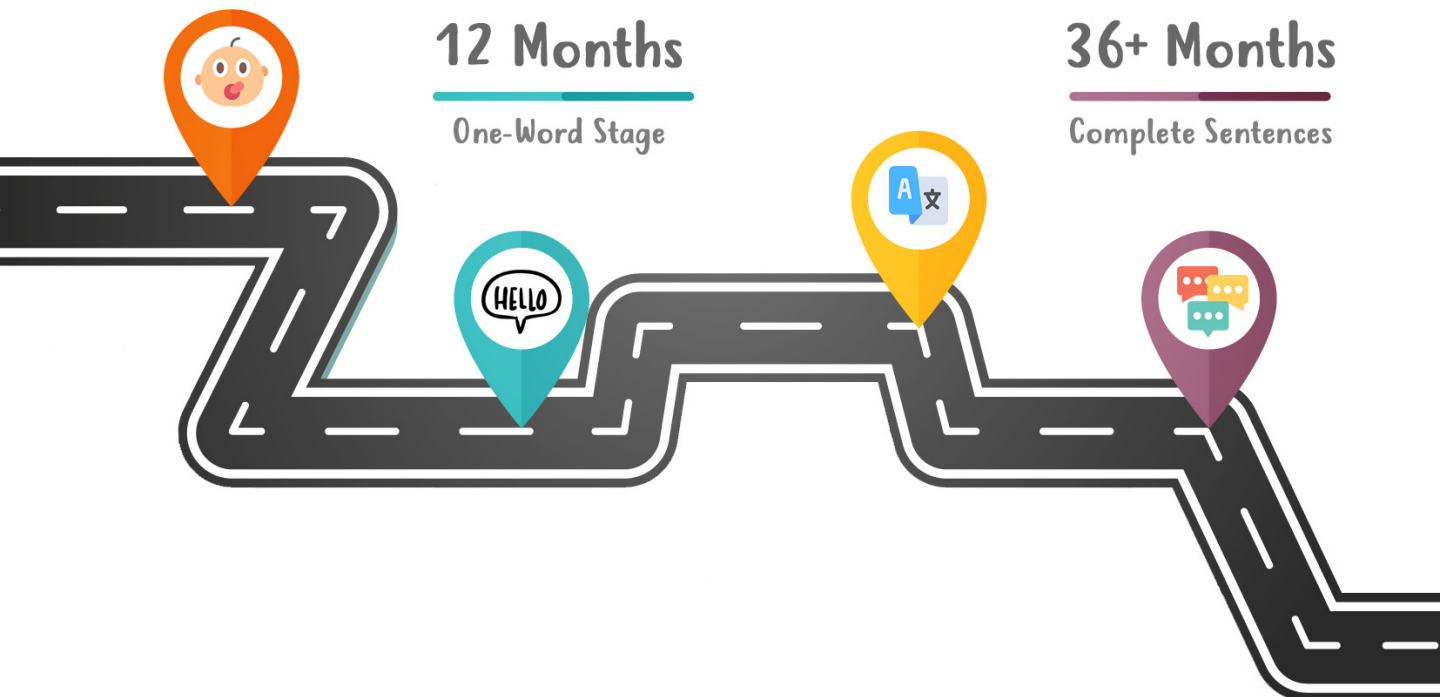
Two-Word Stage

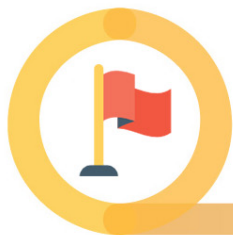
**12 Months**

One-Word Stage

**36+ Months**

Complete Sentences





## QUESTION ONE

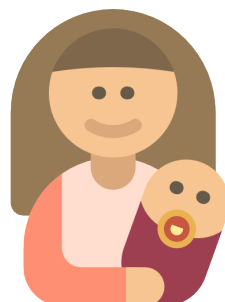
What are the milestones in typical language development?

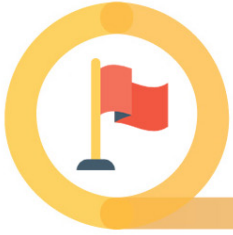
### 4 MONTHS – CANONICAL BABBLING

The “da da da”s that you may hear on a daily basis are certainly not random strings of gibberish, but they are in fact purposeful endeavours that indicate your child’s first foray into language learning. At this stage, babies start to engage in canonical babbling, which consists of well-formed syllables having consonant-vowel structures that reflect the features of their native languages [2]. In other words, if your child is exposed to English and Chinese/Malay/Tamil for example, you may observe that he or she is likely to babble according to the sounds that are found in those languages. This shows that they are able to differentiate between their two languages and discriminate speech sounds of their native languages accordingly, such that they are able to produce language-specific patterns in their babbling [3].

### 12 MONTHS – ONE-WORD STAGE

To most parents like yourselves, this may be one of the most exciting stages of language development because you will get to witness your child producing his or her first words. Even though they may not be very articulate at first, the intonations of those utterances should sound similar to familiar words that are from their native languages. Using the same strategies found in the babbling stage, most children who are learning English usually produce first words such as “ball” or “car” (following a consonant-vowel-consonant structure) and “mummy” or “bottle” (developing two-syllable words that contain a stressed first syllable) [4], since English is a stress-timed language. By 18 months, they should also have an average vocabulary size of about 50 words [4].





## QUESTION ONE

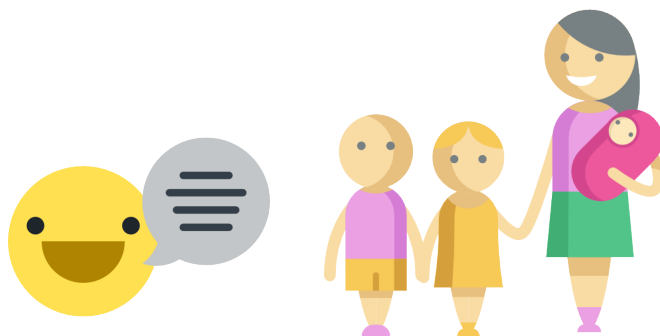
What are the milestones in typical language development?

### 24 MONTHS – TWO-WORD STAGE

Similar to the one-word stage, your child may not be very fluent in his or her pronunciations yet, but their vocabularies should have expanded to about 250 words at this point [4]. More importantly, they are now able to extend one-word utterances into two-word phrases known as telegraphic speech, such as “ball go” or “mummy car”, to communicate their intentions and establish the relationship between people, objects and actions. This type of speech is characteristic due to the omission of adjectives, articles and other grammatical features that you would normally expect to find in regular speech, which has been said to facilitate the learning of word meanings by focusing heavily on content words [5].

### 36+ MONTHS – COMPLETE SENTENCES

From the age of 3 onwards, your child would start to gain more fluency in his or her languages and experience an accelerated rate of vocabulary expansion of approximately 1,000 words per year (in English) [6]. Furthermore, they can now form complex sentences and their articulation should be fluent enough for most people to understand them [4]. However, this does not necessarily mean that they have achieved fully adult-like speech but instead, any errors made in their utterances should not interfere with intelligibility [4].





## QUESTION ONE

What are the milestones in typical language development?

To supplement the language development roadmap illustrated above, the [Child Developmental Screening](#) used by the Ministry of Health in Singapore is a series of handy checklists that can assess a child's developmental progress from as young as 4 weeks all the way to 6 years old [7]. However, this is by no means an official clinical diagnosis and should only be taken as a form of reference to gauge your child's current development, unless being administered by a clinician.

Some items adapted from the Child Developmental Screening checklists (not comprehensive) include [8]:

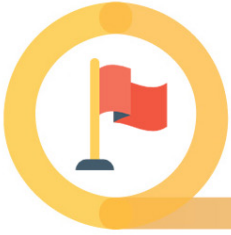
From 3 months to 5 months:

- Responds to sounds by turning towards the direction of the source
- Makes vocalisations besides crying
- Laughs out loud without being tickled

From 6 months to 12 months:

- Makes single sounds consisting of a consonant and a vowel e.g. "ba"
- Imitates any sounds after you e.g. coughing, clicking of tongue
- Able to use the words "mama" and "papa" specifically





## QUESTION ONE

What are the milestones in typical language development?

From 15 months to 18 months:

- Able to point to at least 2 parts of the body e.g. eyes, nose independently when asked
- Able to say at least 3 words other than “mama” and “papa”, which means the same things each time he or she uses those words

From 2 years to 3 years:

- Uses a combination of at least 2 words to make a meaningful phrase e.g. “want drink”
- Able to name at least 2 simple objects such as “dog” or “bus” using picture cards
- Able to answer simple questions such as “how old are you” or “what is your name”

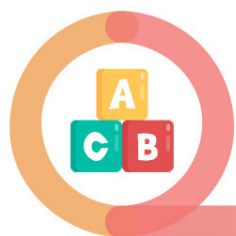
From 4 years to 6 years:

- Able to count from 1 to 10 in the correct sequence
- Able to name at least 3 colours correctly e.g. “blue”, “yellow”, “red” using blocks
- Able to tell what are the functions of at least 3 basic objects such as “cup”, “chair” and “pencil”

PART THREE

# Language Errors





## QUESTION TWO

Should I be worried if my child is making errors in language?

At times, you may notice your child making certain mistakes during your interactions with him or her. These may include errors such as grammar e.g. “eated” (ate), pronunciation e.g. “pish” (fish) or maybe even in their choice of words e.g. “doggie” (for every four-legged animal). On top of that, they may not be fluent enough to express themselves in one language entirely, and may tend to borrow words or structures from one language to help them to communicate in the other language instead. Most of you may interpret these errors as an emerging sign of language delay, but you may be surprised to hear that these types of errors usually occur naturally in a typical language development!

### OVERGENERALISATION/UNDERGENERALISATION

One of the most common errors pointed out previously is overgeneralisation, which is the extension of certain standard rules e.g. “-ed” for marking past tense and “s” for marking plural onto non-standard forms e.g. “feeded” and “fishs”, because plural formation and verb inflections are highly irregular in English [9]. While your child may appear to be struggling with grammar, he or she is in fact applying the rules that they have learnt prior to making these novel structures, which is evidence that they are tracking regularities in language. Overgeneralisation also applies to other areas such as the use of certain vocabulary extensively e.g. “car” for any vehicles on the road. Similarly, they are showing progress by adapting words in their existing vocabulary to substitute the labels for new objects that they have yet to learn.

On the other hand, undergeneralisation may also occur even though it is less frequent than overgeneralisation. As its name suggests, it is the opposite of overgeneralisation, where certain common words are used in highly specific contexts e.g. “dog” only refers to the family dog but not any other dogs outside of the home. Yet again, this is another type of language error that would allow you to understand how your child is trying to interpret word meanings and making sense of the world around them. Instead of reacting negatively and trying to correct these mistakes by reprimanding your child, it may be more beneficial for his or her learning if you incorporate positive reinforcements, by saying things like “you did a good job when you **fed** the **fish**” or “yes that is a very cute **dog**, it looks just like our **dog** at home”, which would eventually allow them to differentiate between the mistakes that they are making and the proper term or grammar to use in that context [9].



## QUESTION TWO

Should I be worried if my child is making errors in language?

### CODE-MIXING

Apart from the errors mentioned above, you may also find that your child is often mixing up his or her two languages within the same utterance. Although it may appear as though your child is confused and unable to distinguish between using one or the other language, but he or she is actually developing two separate phonological, lexical and grammatical systems for their two languages [4]. In fact, it has been found that even newborn babies are able to differentiate between the rhythmic patterns of their two native languages [10]. Furthermore, children who engage in code-mixing are able to adhere to grammatical rules that are similar to what adults would use when code-mixing [11], which is evidence that they are certainly capable of keeping their two languages apart. An explanation as to why your child may be using code-mixing as a communicative strategy could be that they are imitating the adults around them, who are most likely engaging in code-mixing themselves too [12]. Another reason could also be similar to why children use overgeneralisation or undergeneralisation frequently, because they simply have not learnt a particular word in a language and are flexible enough to substitute it with a word that is similar in meaning from the other language instead [12]. Likewise, this particular type of “error” may be more pleasing to note than a cause for alarm, since it reflects your bilingual child’s ability to innovate and use language creatively.

With that being said, some of you may still be thinking of steering away from code-mixing, or adopt a “one-parent, one-language” strategy when communicating with your child. However, there is no substantial evidence that supports the effectiveness of such a method on your child’s language development [4]. Instead of actively trying to make your child speak only one language at a time, you may wish to expose your child to a higher quality and quantity of input for both languages, especially since they receive significantly less proportion of input in each language in a bilingual environment [12]. As much as many of you are working parents who have very busy schedules, try to avoid replacing face-to-face interactions with your child using video tools or technology such as television, because it may be less than ideal when trying to help your child develop language [13]. For your reference, you may wish to refer to the end of this booklet for some suggested activities that would benefit parent-child bonding, as well as language development in a fun way.

## PART FOUR

# Early Signs of Atypical Language Development





## QUESTION THREE

What are the early signs of atypical language development?

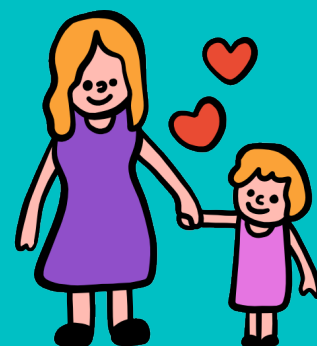
If you find that your child has not achieved the milestones stipulated in the previous sections, do not panic! Remember that every child is an individual and they develop language at their own pace. Nevertheless, you may be concerned that your child is developing at a different pace as their peers, or even their siblings when they were at that age previously.

Indeed, it may be difficult to tell if your child is merely a late-bloomer or experiencing atypical language development at such a young age, but here are some early signs of atypical language development that may be useful in predicting the possibilities of potential language disorders [14]:

- No signs of babbling (4 to 7 months)
- Lack of gestures e.g. waving, pointing (7 to 12 months)
- Only able to produce a few words (12 months to 18 months)
- Does not make sentences with words (18 months to 24 months)
- Speaks fewer than 50 words (24 months)
- Has trouble playing and talking with other children (24 to 36 months)
- Shows no interest in books or drawing, has problems with early reading and writing skills (30 to 36 months)

PART FIVE

# Intervention





## QUESTION FOUR

When is intervention required and where should I seek help?

Although it is difficult to identify atypical language development in infancy, seeking help for early intervention is always a good move should you detect any abnormalities in your child. While the list above is not comprehensive and the absence of those signs do not immediately rule out the possibility of language disorders, approach medical practitioners in related fields for more information as soon as you have any concerns.

Some forms of atypical language development include:

- Autism – Neurodevelopmental disorder affecting the way a person communicates and relates to the people around them [15]
- Auditory Processing Disorder – Trouble understanding language despite having normal hearing [16]
- Specific Language Impairment – Expressive difficulties with grammar and deficits in representing dependent relationships e.g. “The fish is eaten by the man” (Who is eaten by who?)

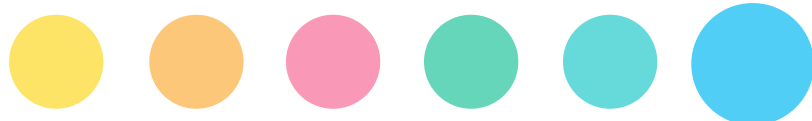
You may be keen to find out more about atypical language development from the links provided below:

- [Autism](#) (KK’s Women’s and Children’s Hospital) [15]
- [Auditory Processing Disorder](#) (National University Hospital) [16]
- [Specific Language Impairment](#) (National University Hospital) [17]
- [Speech Therapy](#) (Singapore General Hospital) [18]



# PART SIX

## Nurturing your child's Language Development





## QUESTION FIVE

How can I help to nurture my child's language development?

As we approach the end of this booklet, many of you may be curious to find out how you can contribute to your child's language development. At the end of the day, you may find it helpful to keep these three "T"s in mind when interacting with your child [19]:

- T**une in (to what your child says)
- T**alk more (using a rich vocabulary)
- T**ake turns (to have a conversation with your child and listen to what he or she has to say)

To facilitate those three simple rules, here are some engaging activities that you should definitely try out with your child!





## QUESTION FIVE

How can I help to nurture my child's language development?

### Receptive Skills (suitable from 0+ months onwards)

#### STORYTELLING

- Wordless storybooks encourage creative parental input and can be repeated many times with novel utterances!
- Make believe with props/toys if books are not your thing! This helps to gather the attention of your child and fine-tune their motor skills by playing with objects as well.

#### SINGING

- Music adds fun to the learning process! Nursery rhymes help to engage your child and you may also want to include actions and encourage your child to imitate your moves, as gestures are interactive and also a great way to learn.

### Productive Skills (suitable for 36+ months)

#### RHYME TIME!

- Come up with a few rhyme pairs e.g. bat/hat, ball/hall and ask your child to repeat after you and identify what is the difference between the two, which trains phonological segmentation.
- Make rhymes with your child with real or nonsense words by adding verses to familiar nursery rhymes (you may also do so with your mother tongues) e.g.



Twinkle twinkle little star,  
How I wonder what you are.  
Up above the world so high,  
Like a diamond in the sky.  
Twinkle twinkle little star,  
**How I want a chocolate bar.**



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