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Occupational Therapy Speech Therapy

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Early Referrals for Speech and Language Challenges On the Rise



Bonnie Hacker, OT
Founder / Director

Across the nation, pediatric speech pathologists report that they are receiving more referrals for children younger than three. This past February, Medscape conducted a poll of healthcare practitioners asking "When do you usually refer children for speech services?" Ninety-one percent of respondents gave an answer that was younger than 36 months. This is good news for parents and children. Referral for early intervention is believed to be the best method for mitigating or avoiding difficulties that often persist into adolescence and adulthood.¹⁻³



In this survey, only 5% of respondents indicated that they make referrals at 12 months. Of course, a referral between 12 and 18 months is highly appropriate. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) now recommends developmental screenings during all well child visits - ideally at 9, 18, and 30 months.⁴ Their policy states that repeated and regular screening is more likely to identify problems in time for early intervention, before major milestones are missed. The AAP also points out that the diagnosis of a specific developmental disorder is not necessary for an early intervention referral to be made.

Look for these milestones in the development of speech and language skills of very young children.

12 – 15 Months:

- Is not using exclamatory expressions such as "Oh-oh," "No-no," or "Ta-da"
- Is not experimenting with language during play
- Is not using "no" meaningfully

18 – 24 Months:

- Is not making 2 word sentences
- Is not using intelligible words
- Cannot imitate 2 word phrases

32 – 36 Months:

- Is not responding to direct questions
- Is not speaking in complete sentences
- Is not attempting to use plural nouns

15 – 18 Months:

- Cannot use 5-10 words spontaneously
- Is not attempting to sing songs
- Does not use language to communicate needs
- Is not jabbering tunelessly during play

24 – 32 Months:

- Is not attempting past tense sentences like "She jumped."
- Is expressing frustration at not being understood
- Is not imitating and experimenting with words



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References:

1. Nelson H, Nygren P, Walker M. et al. "Screening for speech and language delay in preschool children: systematic evidence review for the US Preventive Services Task Force." *Pediatrics*. 2006; 117 (2): 298-319.
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3. Leung A, Kao C. Evaluation and management of the child with speech delay. *Am Fam Phys*. 1999; 59 (11): 3121-3128.
4. American Academy of Pediatrics. Identifying Infants and Young Children with Developmental Disorders in the Medical Home: An Algorithm for Developmental Surveillance and Screening. *Pediatrics*. 2006; 118 (1): 405-420.