How Children Learn to Understand Language

0-12 months

Babies use contextual clues to understand familiar gestures, words and sounds. They observe and respond to facial expressions. They are learning to stop and look when they hear their own name. They are learning to recognise the voices of familiar adults.

Note: Babies can show they recognise people or objects by getting excited and kicking or moving their arms rapidly.

12-18 months

Children of this age are developing their ability to follow other people’s gestures and pointing.

They are often able to respond to things being said when in a familiar context and with a special person, e.g., ‘where’s Mummy?’, ‘where’s your ear?’. An understanding of single words in context is developing, e.g., ‘cup’, ‘milk’, ‘daddy’

18 months to 2 years

Children of this age select familiar objects by name and will go and find objects when asked or identify objects from a group. They are able to understand simple phrases (e.g. ‘coat on’, ‘bath time’) but also rely on gestures, pointing and everyday routines to support their understanding. They are beginning to follow instructions containing 2 key pieces of information, (e.g. give me the cup and the ball, where’s big teddy). A child at this stage is beginning understanding language at a two-word level.

2- 2 ½ years

Children of this age will be more consistent at following instructions containing 2 key pieces of information, (e.g. give me the cup and the ball, where’s big teddy). They are said to be at the ‘two-word level’. Children of this age are able to identify action words by pointing to the right picture, e.g., ‘who’s jumping?’

2 ½ to 3 ½ years

Children of this age are beginning to understand ‘who’, ‘what’, ‘where’ in simple questions and are developing an understanding of simple concepts such as big/little.

Children of this age are also able to understand more complex sentences and follow instructions containing three key pieces of information (e.g. ‘put the big apple on the blue plate’, where there are big and little fruit and two different coloured plates). A child at this stage is said to be understanding language at a three word level.

3 ½ -4 Years

Children of this age are beginning to understand instructions containing 4 key pieces of information (e.g. ‘drive the big green tractor to the farm’, where there are different sized and coloured vehicles, and a range of locations). Children will be starting to understand prepositions ‘under’, ‘on’, ‘top’, and will be able to answer simple ‘who’, ‘what’, and ‘where’ questions. They will be starting to understand concepts such as ‘same’ and ‘different’. Children at this age rely less on clues from the context or environment to support their understanding.

4-5 Years

Children of this age are starting to understand use of objects, e.g., ‘what do we use to cut things?’. They are beginning to understand ‘why’ and ‘how’ questions. Their understanding of time concepts is developing, e.g. ‘today’, ‘yesterday’, ‘first’.

* Understand longer 2 part spoken instructions e.g. Touch your nose, then your ear
* Understand ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions
* Understand that words can be put into groups or categories, and give examples from each category
* Understand a range of words to describe the idea of time, shape, texture, size and know in which context to use them
* Name objects, characters and animals from a description
* Use words more specifically to make meaning clear children at this age will ask if they are unsure

5-7 Years

At this age a child can:

* Know the key points they need to focus on to answer a question or follow an instruction
* Begin to ignore less important information
* Be aware of when a message is not clear and ask for an explanation
* Understands complex 2 to 3-part instructions e.g. Get your bag, put on your coat and then put on your shoes

7-9 Years

At this age a child’s comprehension skills are becoming more sophisticated. At this age a child can:

* Understand inferred meaning as well as information that is explicitly presented
* Listen to information, work out which elements are key and make relevant, related comments
* Identify clearly when they haven’t understood and be specific about what additional information they need
* Can use clues in text or stories to make predictions

9-11 years

At this age, a child can also notice and may comment on not only what is said but how it is said. A child can also understand different question types:

* Open questions – “Can you tell me all about your visit to the museum?”
* Closed questions – “Did you enjoy your trip to the museum?”
* Rhetorical questions – “Wasn’t that a lovely trip to the museum?”

They may also begin to appreciate sarcasm when it’s obvious and will understand and enjoy simple jokes and recognise simple idioms but can’t really explain why they’re funny or what they mean.

11-14 Years

At this stage a child will be able to:

* Follow complex directions e.g. get the blue box that’s on the bottom shelf of the kitchen cupboard
* Understand common, simple ‘sayings’ in context e.g. I couldn’t keep a straight face
* Begin to get someone else’s point of view when discussing
* Understand factual information but may still find it harder to understand inferred information e.g. what is said: ‘It’s getting noisy in here….’what is implied: ‘You need to be quiet’
* Starting to understand sarcasm when exaggerated e.g. You’re such a talented singer

14+ Years

By now a child will be able to process large amounts of new and complex spoken information. They can also:

* Use language to solve more complex problems
* Understand longer and more complex instructions, which don’t follow the word order of the sentence e.g. ‘Before you go upstairs can you fill out this form and put it in an envelope.
* Build an argument to persuade and respond to views different to their own
* Infer and deduce information
* Understand figurative language
* Fully understand sarcasm and is able to use it well e.g. “I’m so happy to see you”
* Know when and why they don’t understand; asks for help in a specific way e.g. can you explain that to me again? I got the beginning, but I don’t understand the last steps
* They are likely to still be challenged by some instruction words e.g. modify, generate, consider, evaluate