

Language development: 5-6 years

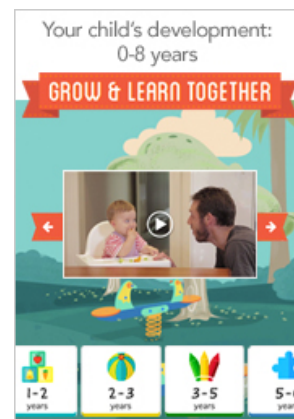
Language development in children in the early school years sees kids learning more and longer words. They get more skilled at putting words together in new ways. At this age, they also become more familiar with how language sounds, and how sounds combine to make words.

Language development at 5-6 years: early literacy and language sounds

By five years, children are **aware of the sounds that make up words**. They can identify words beginning with the same sound – for example, ‘Mummy made magic marshmallows’ – and words that rhyme. They might play rhyming games and sing out words that rhyme, such as ‘bat’, ‘cat’, ‘fat’, ‘hat’, ‘mat’.

From 5-6 years, your child might know some or all of the sounds that go with the different letters of the alphabet. This is important for the development of reading skills.

Children also become aware that single sounds combine into words. For example, when the ‘t’, ‘o’ and ‘p’ sounds are put together, they make the word ‘top’.



When starting school, children might still have problems saying a few sounds. An example is the ‘r’ sound, particularly in words like ‘truck’, ‘drain’, ‘bring’ and so on.

Vocabulary and language development

By **five years**, children will use the correct form of verbs to talk about past and future events – for example, ‘I jumped’, ‘I played’, or ‘I will play’. Alongside this, they begin to understand some concepts of time – for example, night, day and yesterday.

Your child will start to realise that there are exceptions to grammatical rules – for example, ‘broke’, ‘threw’ and ‘ate’ rather than ‘brealed’, ‘throwed’ and ‘eated’. But it will take a few more years for her to learn the many exceptions in the English language. Even at eight, some children might find the past tense of some verbs tricky.

At **5-6 years**, children understand that **single words might have different meanings** and start to rely more on the context of a word to find a particular meaning. For example, ‘cool’ means something different when you say, ‘It’s a cool day’, compared with when you say, ‘That’s a really cool robot you’ve built’. They also begin to understand metaphors and non-literal language – for example, ‘Make up your mind’.

Your child will understand that he can make new words by joining two other words – for example, ‘bookshelf’. You’ll see ‘compound’ words like this more often in your child’s speech at this age.

Your child will also begin using longer words as she gets to know that the beginnings and endings of words change their meanings. For example, she understands that she can add ‘ness’ (as in ‘happiness’), ‘un’ (as in ‘unwrap’), and ‘er’ (as when ‘teach’ becomes ‘teacher’).

And your child will also start to understand that words don’t always need an ‘s’ to become plurals – for example, ‘feet’ and ‘mice’ rather than ‘foots’ and ‘mouses’.

Using sentences as part of language development

By **five years**, children can follow three-step directions.

Your child will be able to understand and combine words to form active sentences – for example, ‘The cat chased the dog’ – and is beginning to understand passive sentences – for example, ‘The cat was chased by the dog’.

But when children are describing pictures, they might mix up who is doing what to whom. They might also have trouble understanding pronoun references – for example, who ‘she’ refers to if you say, ‘The woman told the last girl to arrive that she was late’.

From 5-8 years, this **understanding of sentence construction improves gradually**.

Storytelling and language development

From 4-8 years, **children get much better at telling stories**. Your child’s stories are probably longer and more detailed. The stories might be made up, or about things that have actually happened. They might have a theme, character or plot and contain actions and events in a logical sequence – for example, ‘The boat sank, so everybody had to swim to the beach’.

It’ll be easier to work out who your child is talking about when he’s telling a story, and how the events in his stories fit together.

In these years, your child might:

- use different linking words in the right way – for example, ‘because’, ‘then’, ‘now’, ‘when’, ‘before’, ‘while’, ‘although’
- use different sentence types to present the same information
- use pronouns – for example, ‘he’, ‘she’, ‘they’ – when it’s clear from the story who your child is talking about
- understand the difference between factual and inferential questions – that is, the difference between ‘What happened?’ and ‘Why do you think ... ?’



Children grow and develop at different rates. The information in this article is offered as a guide only. If you’re at all concerned about your child’s language development, speak with your GP, child and family health nurse or other health professional. If your health professional doesn’t have concerns about your child, but you still do, it’s OK to get another opinion.



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