

# Language Development Red Flags by Age

Communication milestones — 12 months to 5 years

The milestones below are based on NZ Well Child Tamariki Ora guidelines and international research. A "red flag" means most children of this age CAN do this. If your child can't, it's worth a conversation with your GP or a registered SLT. This is a guide, not a diagnostic tool.

## 12–18 months

- Says at least 5–10 different words (not just "mama" / "dada")
- Points to things they want or to share interest with you
- Responds to their name and simple instructions ("come here")
- Waves bye-bye and plays peek-a-boo and other simple games

**! Seek assessment if:** No words at 16 months, or no gestures (pointing, waving) at 12 months.

## 2 years

- Uses at least 50 words across different categories
- Combining two words ("more juice", "daddy go", "big dog")
- Strangers can understand about half of what they say
- Follows two-step instructions ("Get your shoes and bring them here")

**! Seek assessment if:** Fewer than 50 words, or no word combinations, at 24 months.

## 3 years

- Vocabulary of 200–500+ words; learning new words rapidly
- Speaking in 3–4 word sentences most of the time
- Strangers can understand about 75% of what they say
- Asks "what", "where", and "who" questions

**! Seek assessment if:** Sentences shorter than 3 words, or difficult for strangers to understand.

## 4 years

- Sentences of 4–6 words; beginning to use more complex grammar
- Strangers understand almost everything they say
- Answers "why" and "how" questions
- Can tell a simple story in sequence

**! Seek assessment if:** Still mainly 2–3 word phrases, or significantly hard for strangers to understand.

## 5 years

- Sentences of 5–6+ words with mostly correct grammar
- Clear speech — almost all sounds produced correctly
- Can retell a story or event in order with some detail
- Follows 3-step instructions reliably

**! Seek assessment if:** Significant speech sound errors, grammar well behind peers, or difficulty being understood.

### **Remember: every child develops at their own pace.**

Missing a milestone doesn't automatically mean something is wrong — but it does mean it's worth a conversation with your GP or a registered SLT. Early support is always more effective than waiting.