

# PREVERBAL SKILLS: The Skills Your Baby Develops BEFORE Talking

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## The Skills Your Baby Develops BEFORE Talking

As soon as your little one is born, they begin developing prelinguistic skills. These prelinguistic, or nonverbal skills, help in supporting later language acquisition. So, what are **preverbal skills**? **Preverbal skills are the ways in which we communicate, without using words.** These include skills such as eye contact, facial expressions, pointing, gestures, joint attention and imitation; all an essential foundation for supporting our kiddos in their ability to express and communicate.

## Why are preverbal skills important?

Prelinguistic, or preverbal communication skills, are important because they set the foundation for expression. For example, let's take a look at eye contact, something that happens almost instantly when a child is born. If a child is having difficulty with this skill, then they may not have as many opportunities to be noticing what is happening around them. Similarly, difficulties in the area of joint attention could also mean less opportunities for a child to develop an understanding of language. **Joint attention** is when you and your child are attending to the same thing at the same time. For example, if you and your kiddo are looking out the window and you see a bird, you point up at the bird and say "bird," and your child looks up at the bird;

this helps your child draw an association between an object and a word they are hearing/attending to. If a child is having difficulty looking and attending to various stimuli and speech in their environment, then your baby begins to miss opportunities to hear the language and make associations between words and their meaning. Both of these examples play an impact on a child's ability to understand and use language.

Children that experience difficulty in the development of preverbal skills may go on to have difficulty with the understanding and use of language, also known as a receptive and/or expressive language delay. That is why it is important for parents to identify these areas and work on developing them early on as part of your daily routine.

## What are preverbal skills?

Preverbal skills are the way we communicate, without using words and they include skills that are essential for supporting later language development. Some preverbal skills include:

- 1. Eye Contact:** Eye contact happens almost instantly after a baby is born. Babies begin to discriminate faces and recognize those that are important to getting their needs and wants met. Sustaining eye contact is a way for babies to gain information, get their needs and wants met, gain attention, and helps in the later development of speech sound acquisition as they pay attention to the way sounds are formed on the mouth.
- 2. Joint Attention:** Joint attention is the ability to follow another person's focus and attention, as well as drawing another person's focus and attention to what you are attending to. Joint attention draws people (in this case, child and parent), to attend to the same thing at the same time. This is a vital skill for communication and later language skills.
- 3. Pointing:** By 12 months of age, babies begin pointing with their index finger at objects or events of interest. Pointing is a very important preverbal skill. It helps a child get their needs and wants met and is often later paired with vocalizations. Pointing encourages a child and adult to engage in an activity together, by drawing the adult's attention to what the child is pointing towards (joint attention), further allowing the child to communicate wants, needs, ideas and emotions without needing to use verbal expression.
- 4. Listening & Attending:** Babies begin to discriminate sounds at an early age, and can identify the voice of important people versus non important sounds. By attending to sounds, babies later begin to discriminate between speech sounds.
- 5. Facial Expressions:** Smiling is one of the earliest facial expressions a baby develops. From about 6 weeks old, babies begin to smile. Smiling, and other facial expressions, helps foster more social interactions as it serves as a nonverbal response to describe your feelings.
- 6. Imitation:** By 9 months of age babies begin copying hand clapping and vocal sounds. Imitation is a preverbal skill that supports later language development, such as imitation of sounds and words. Imitation helps foster motor movements, including fine/gross motor skills, as well as oral motor movements associated with speech sound production.
- 7. Facial Expressions:** The understanding of language is referred to as receptive language. In the first year of life, children develop an understanding of their environment, following eye gaze, facial expressions and

gestures.

**8. Expression:** The expression of language is referred to as expressive language and this comes in many forms. In the early ages, expression is in the form of facial expressions, gestures, eye contact and body language. First words begin to emerge around 12 months of age.

## How can I tell if my child is having difficulty with preverbal skills?

A child with difficulties in preverbal skills, may:

- Demonstrate inconsistent or no eye contact
- Have difficulty babbling
- Show little to no response to different tones of voice or facial expressions
- Have difficulty copying gestures and/or facial expressions
- Show limited joint attention or interest in playing with others
- Have difficulty using gestures to gain attention

It is important to remember that all children present differently and this list is not comprehensive, nor indicative of a language delay. Each of these skills are acquired at various ages and stages. That is why it is always best to consult with a professional if you have any concerns.

## What are some other challenges my child might face if they are delayed in developing preverbal skills?

The ability to express ourselves helps us to feel seen and heard. When we have difficulties in the area of expression, this can lead to frustration as we feel that others are not understanding us. The same rings true for our children when they experience difficulties or delays in expression and the development of preverbal skills. When a child presents with delays in preverbal skills, they may also present with difficulties in:

- 1. Attention & Concentration:** Children with delays in preverbal skills may have a difficult time sustaining attention to tasks for a prolonged period of time. A child's attention is a fundamental skill necessary for overall cognitive development.
- 2. Understanding Language:** The understanding of various linguistic concepts may be difficult for children who have not yet developed several preverbal skills. Delays in this area may lead to language disorders in the area of receptive language.
- 3. Expressive Language:** Expression through the form of signs, sounds or words may be delayed for children who have delays in their development of various preverbal skills. Delays in expressive language skills may lead to an expressive language disorder in a later age.

**4. Behaviors:** If a child presents with delays in preverbal skills, and therefore presents with difficulties in the understanding and expression of language; this may lead to not being fully understood by others. This could then create feelings of frustration or withdrawal, which plays an impact on a child's overall cognitive development, including social interaction development, emotional development, and/or speech and language development.

## How can I work on preverbal skills with my child?

There are many strategies and activities that adults can use to target preverbal skills with children. One of my favorites is **play!** When we engage in play with our babies, we are working on so many important skills: shared attention, turn taking, social skills, gestures, facial expressions, receptive language, expressive language, eye contact...just to name a few. A few more ways to target preverbal skills are:

- 1. Following your little one's lead:** This is a great way to work on joint attention too! When you follow your baby's eye gaze, you are showing them that you are interested in what they want to communicate with you. You are validating their form of expression and communication.
- 2. Simplify your language:** When you follow your little one's lead and see what they are looking at, use simplified language to describe what they are sharing with you. For example, if your little one's eye gaze shifts to a ball to indicate they want you to roll the ball, you can look at the ball and say "ball" or "ROLL ball." Remember, communication is not just the words we speak, it comes in many forms.
- 3. Vocal Intonation:** The emphases on "ROLL" will help draw your little one's attention to a word and/or concept you are trying to teach them. Varying your intonation and pitch not only draws in your little one's attention, but it makes things fun for children!
- 4. Get on your little one's level:** Get at eye level with your little one and hold objects close to your mouth. When your little one can really see how sounds and words are formed, they will be more inclined to copy those oral motor movements too. Remember, use vocal intonation and also exaggerate your mouth movements so your little one can really see how the sounds are formed, this will really help with later speech sound development. Getting face-to-face is also great for learning facial expressions and using eye contact, overall, it is a great way to connect with your kiddo!

The best part about all these tips is that you can use them during any daily routine! For parents, planning out a whole lesson around speech and language development can be tough and the truth is, you aren't supposed to know it all, that is why I am here to help! Teaching preverbal skills and helping your child develop speech, language and communication skills does not need to be tough and an addition to your to-do list, just make it part of your day! Language opportunities are presenting themselves all the time. For example, when you are having snack, getting dressed, getting in the car, going out for a walk, reading books, playing...these are just some of the amazing ways you can work on preverbal skills, expose your child to vocabulary, respond to your child's communication, interact with your child, and help develop skills that lay the foundation for later speech and language skills.

# Who should I see if my child has difficulties/delays with preverbal skills?

Speech language pathologists are often a wonderful support in this area, as well as occupational therapists. They will help your child develop and/or increase:

- Eye contact
- Joint attention
- Turn taking
- Play skills
- Social interactions
- Receptive language
- Expressive language
- Attention and concentration
- Self-regulation

Remember, early detection and early intervention is so important! If you are reading this and thinking “this might be my child, but I’m not sure,” then follow that parental instinct and don’t let anybody tell you otherwise. I am not an advocate on the wait-and-see philosophy, that is why we offer free consultations (speech, language and occupational therapy) no matter where you are in the world, to help put your mind at ease and to help you find a therapist near you!

To schedule, click the link below.

Book a Complimentary Consult



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Sholeh Shahinfar is the founder of Valued Voices, and a licensed Speech Language Pathologist, Child Communication Specialist and Certified Oral Motor Therapist. She is passionate about uplifting children's

voices in the world and inspiring self-expression. In her free time, she loves going to the ocean, exploring nature with her pup Kobe, and spending time with her family and friends!