

# Toddler Speech: unraveling the mystery

Emily Ferjencik, MS, CCC-SLP

When little ones are learning to talk, words are rarely accurate. This often leads to questions like: “Is that a word?” “Did he just say...?” “Did anyone else hear that?” “Does that count as a word?” “Is this normal?”

Toddlers are working hard to figure out how to make all those sounds in the right order at the right time. It isn't easy. Most toddler words are generally simplified versions of true words (*i.e.* “wawa” for *water*). Sometimes many of the toddler's words are only understood by those who spend the most time with them.

Just take a look at this short sample of common toddler words (all of which are typical in development) and you'll see how a toddler can be hard to understand:

- “u”/up
- “tah”/car
- “bawoo”/balloon OR blue
- “daw”/dog
- “doh”/go
- “dut”/duck
- “dah”/star
- “pay”/plane (airplane)

With so many distorted, substituted, and omitted sounds, it's no wonder some people have a hard time understanding toddlers. So how do you know when your toddler's speech is just typically hard to understand or when it might be time to ask a speech-language pathologist? It generally comes down to how often he is understood by familiar people (moms, dads, caregivers). If a toddler's mother (or most familiar caregiver) understands her 2-year-old less than 50% of the time then that could be a recipe for frustration...for all involved.

Here's a general guideline of what I tend to look for when deciding whether a toddler's speech is on track (even if it's difficult to understand at times):

## 1. Is there a consonant sound where a consonant sound should be?

It doesn't necessarily need to be the right consonant sound. For example, “top” for *stop* would be fine because there is a consonant sound at the beginning and at the end. Saying “ah” for *stop* would mean that consonant sounds are being left out of the beginning and the end making this almost impossible to understand if the child weren't also holding up their hand at the end of some movement.

**HOW TO HELP:** If your little one leaves sounds out and says things like “u” for *up*, you can start emphasizing the missing sound when you repeat it back. Use a visual cue (clap, tap, point, raise a finger, etc) when you say “p”. Your toddler doesn't necessarily need to try it again in that moment, they may just need to hear it again and again and again until they are ready.



## 2. Are there a variety of vowel sounds attempted in words?

For example, a child may say “dah” for *dog*, “da” for *dad*, and “doo” for *two*. Using a few different vowels greatly improves how well a word can be understood. If *dog*, *dad*, and *two* all sounded like “duh” then it would be really hard to figure out the meaning.

**HOW TO HELP:** SING! Sing words slowly. Singing naturally elongates vowel sounds allowing toddlers to listen to them longer. Call out to missing objects or people when you can’t find them or when you’re playing peek-a-boo “mooommyyyy, where are you?”

## 3. Are there a variety of consonant sounds?

Having at least a handful (or two) of consonant sounds when attempting words is important, just as with vowel sounds. Typically the earliest consonant sounds toddlers will use in words are: *b, d, m, n, h, y, t, p,* and *w*. That doesn’t mean these sounds will be accurate all the time and it doesn’t mean a toddler can’t say additional sounds. I get really excited when a toddler can say a “k” or “g” or even a messy “s” sound in word attempts!

**HOW TO HELP:** In general, make sure you always repeat words back to your little one accurately. You can slightly emphasize the sound that he should change. If your toddler is stuck with only 2-3 consonant sounds you might want to play with consonant sounds rather than trying them in words.

## 4. Do the word attempts mostly have the right number of syllables?

I’m not expecting a toddler to use 3-4 syllables in a word but familiar two-syllable words should have two syllables (maybe not the first few times they try it but shortly afterwards). For example, when trying to say *bubble*, does the toddler use two syllables “buhbuh” or just one “buh”? “Dinosaur” is a long word. Many toddlers will shorten it to “dino” or “disaur”. That’s fine.

**HOW TO HELP:** Clapping, tapping syllables is a fun way to emphasize two parts. Singing can be helpful too. Another idea would be to give an action to each part of the word. Making words active might be more interesting to active toddlers! Try *dinosaur* by putting your arms up high for “di” on your hips for “no” and on the ground for “saur”.

## 5. Do the words become more accurate over time?

The first time a toddler says “da” for *daddy*, everyone cheers! In the next weeks or months to follow we would expect that word to change to “dada” and then eventually “daddy”. As long as words are changing and becoming more accurate, that’s what’s most important. They all start off a little messy!

If you’re wondering at what age all of these things happen, I’m generally referring to the 18-30 month age range in speech development. However, the range of normal is so huge that I hesitate to attach a specific month with a specific sound (others may disagree). The progression of sound development and the variety of sounds are the most important factors during this age range. Again, most words are simplified at first. A *doggy* is often a “doddy”, the color *blue* is often “boo”, and a *spoon* is frequently a “boon”. These are all typical.

As a final note, I wrote this as a guide for parents when trying to interpret their toddler’s speech. It is not meant to be a complete examination of speech development and is by no means a substitute for an evaluation by a speech-language pathologist.

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\*For the FULL article and play ideas for early communication, go to [www.letsplaythespeechandlanguage.com](http://www.letsplaythespeechandlanguage.com).

