Should I be worried about my toddler’s language development?

There is a wide range of normal toddler language development. Most children say their first word between 10 and 14 months old, but many children don’t pronounce understandable words until later. Some toddlers may not be able to say understandable words, but they probably communicate in many other ways. Toddlers cry, babble, gesture, point, and make faces to communicate. Toddlers can also understand much more than they can say. If you are concerned about how your child understands and communicates, talk with your HealthySteps Team. They can answer any questions that you have.

You can help your baby or toddler develop communications skills:

Respond to your baby’s gestures, looks, and sounds. When he puts his arms out to you, pick him up, kiss him, and use simple words: “You want up.” When he coos, coo back. When he gazes at you, make eye contact and talk with him. These immediate responses tell your baby that his communications are important and effective. This will encourage him to continue to develop these skills.

Talk with and listen to your child. When you talk with her, give her time to respond. Make eye contact on her level. This will communicate your desire to hear what she has to say. Ask open-ended questions: “What do you think about today’s rainy weather?” “Where do you think the rain goes?” “How do you think the rain helps flowers grow?” “Why do you think the sky is so gray?” Talking with your child helps her see herself as a good communicator and motivates her to keep developing these skills.

Teach your child about nonverbal communication. “Luis, do you see how Andi is holding her hands up to cover her face? She doesn’t like it when you throw the ball so hard. I know you can throw it softer so she will want to keep playing catch with you.”

Help your child develop a “feelings” vocabulary. Provide the names for her emotions. “You’re sad because Daddy left for his trip.” “You’re proud of how tall your tower is!” Keep in mind that feelings are not good or bad, they just are. Sometimes parents are afraid that talking about an intense feeling will escalate it, but many times the opposite happens: When children feel that that their feelings and experiences are respected, they are often able to move on more easily.

Read together. Cuddle together for quiet times with a book. Encourage your older baby to turn the pages and to point to what he sees. Ask your older toddler how the characters might be feeling and wonder together what will happen next. See whether your child can tell you the story based on the illustrations. Older toddlers (12 months and up) can choose their own books. The more interest he has in the book, the more attentive and enjoyable your time together will be.

Narrate what you do as you go through your daily routines. This helps your child connect words with objects and actions. “I’m washing the dishes. I’m squeezing the yellow dish soap into the warm water.” Talk about what you’re doing as you care for your child. “Here we go into the bathtub. Your arms, legs, and tummy are getting all wet. Rubber Ducky is having a bath, too.” Talk as you play together: “You’re brushing your dolly’s hair. She has long hair. Are there any tangles?” With verbal toddlers, you can create a tradition at meal-time where each family member shares something about his day. Ask your child questions about her day. Once she can speak, encourage her to ask you things, too.

Encourage pretend play. Children often express themselves more freely when they’re pretending. It may feel safer to talk about how Teddy Bear is afraid of the dark than how the child is. Pretend play is also a chance to take on different roles and to act out what different people might say, think, or do. This play develops language as well as social skills like empathy.

Make your requests clear, simple, and appropriate for your child’s age and ability. For a 1-year-old, you can give one-step directions like, “Go get the ball.” For an 18-month-old, you can give two-step commands like, “Please go to your room and get your shoes.” Be sure you have your child’s attention first, by calling his name or gently touching him and looking directly at him at his eye level. You can ask an older child to repeat the request to make sure he heard and understood the communication.