

**The stages of expressive language development**  
**Parent-Infant Communication, 1985**  
**Handout – Parent Language Development Objective 16**

Parents of hearing-impaired children are eager to have their children learn to talk. Like all children, hearing-impaired children go through a developmental sequence in learning to talk. The stages in this sequence of spoken expressive language are described below:

1. Lalling (cooing): These are the reflexive sounds that a baby makes just lying in his crib breathing. They are gurgling sounds made up mainly of vowel sounds such as “*ah*”, “*uh*”, “*eh*”, and other throaty utterances.
2. Babbling: Babbling begins when a baby combines consonant sounds with vowels: “*ma-ma-ma*”; “*da-da-da*”; “*guh*”; “*bubu*”. At first the baby babbles a repetition of the same syllable, as in “*ma-ma*”. Then he begins to combine different syllables, as in “*go-ah-du*”. Babbling is a very important step in speech development because while he is babbling, the baby is practising the sounds of his native language so that he can later combine these sounds into words.
3. Imitation: At this stage, the baby first imitates himself. Hearing what he has just babbled is reinforcing to him and he says it again. His first imitation of the sounds he hears others around him making is unconscious. As he gets a little older, games in which he consciously imitates sounds his mother or father make become fun and exciting for both the parents and the child. Sometimes he imitates a word, though it has no meaning for him. Babies also imitate signs before they use them spontaneously.
4. Single words: Finally the baby produces a meaningful and spontaneous word or sign. This word or sign means the same thing every time he uses it. When the word has meaning for the baby and when the listener understands what is said and meant, expressive language has truly begun. In this stage, one word or sign may mean a whole sentence, e.g. “*cookie*” may mean “*I want a cookie*”, or “*I dropped my cookie*”.
5. Jargon: In this stage the baby practices the conversational patterns of speech, that is, the rhythms, accents, and intonation that characterize spoken connected language. In this stage he is not saying anything meaningful though an occasional word may be thrown in. Jargon is the stage when parents say, “He sounds just like he is telling me something but I can’t understand anything he says!” Many children who use signs use “sign jargon” during which they move their hands around, inserting an occasional formal sign.
6. Telegraphic Language: The child uses two or more words to express an idea in an incomplete sentence. “*Doggie no-no*” may mean that Mummy told the dog he could not come in the house or it may mean that the dog should stop barking.

7. Phrases, Sentences and Paragraphs: When a child begins to use all of the words or words and signs necessary to make his thought both complete and understandable, he is generally speaking in phrases and sentences. He is able to produce longer and longer utterances that make sense to the listener, ultimately speaking in whole paragraphs as he tells a story or relates something he did that day.

A child's expressive language is the words or words and signs he uses to convey his wants, needs, feelings and ideas. As he grows, his expressive language will expand both in his use of vocabulary and in the sophistication of the grammar of his utterances.