



Language Development





Language Development

Infants and toddlers are motivated to communicate their needs, share meaning with others, and learn about their world by interacting with their **caregivers** and communities. Language provides children with a powerful tool to share their own thoughts and learn information from others. Over the first 3 years of life, children learn to understand the languages being used around them and communicate using facial expressions, gestures, and words, in addition to other ways.

Language is an important means of communication. At birth, an infant's brain is organized to develop language. Infants are ready to learn any language used by their caregivers and can learn more than one language at the same time. They develop language by listening to sounds, watching their caregivers, and making connections between those sounds and actions and using language to communicate. As they grow older, infants and toddlers learn to connect language to people, objects, and actions in their world. They also develop the capacity to make the sounds of spoken language or the hand movements of signs, producing their first words. Language is at the core of human communication, and the foundations in the Language Development domain describe how children learn to understand and use language over the first 3 years.

Infants and toddlers develop language and early **literacy** skills by interacting with people around them. They may watch a parent signing words for favorite foods and toys. They may experience their grandmother telling a story. They may turn the pages of a board book with a trusted caregiver and explore the pictures, symbols, and pages. These daily experiences, and many others, form the foundations of young children's language development.



Language Development During the First Four Months

Even before they are born, infants hear sounds and learn about the language they experience in the womb (DeCasper & Fifer, 1980; Kisilevsky et al., 2003; May et al., 2011). During the early months, young infants experience sounds, signs, gestures, and facial expressions from the people around them. These experiences, as part of warm and **responsive interactions**, teach children how to communicate and respond to others (Golinkoff et al., 2000). Some infants might experience only one language in their **home** environment, while others might experience more than one language. Children’s language development will differ based on the number of languages they experience, which languages they experience, and their family and cultural practices around language and literacy. Even so, many aspects of language development are similar across **cultures**, languages, and **language varieties**. Children’s language development in the first four months of life form the foundations of their future development in any language they learn.





Early Literacy Development During the First Four Months

Infants respond to early literacy experiences even before they are able to understand the meaning behind a story or a song. Songs, rhymes, and finger plays can be engaging literacy experiences for young infants. Caregivers can also show and communicate about books in the first months of life. Because infants' vision is still developing at this time (Banks & Salapatek, 1978), they often enjoy books with contrasts in color and sensory experiences. Very young infants' experiences with books might include very few words and bright, high-contrast images or “touch and feel” books with different textures to explore.

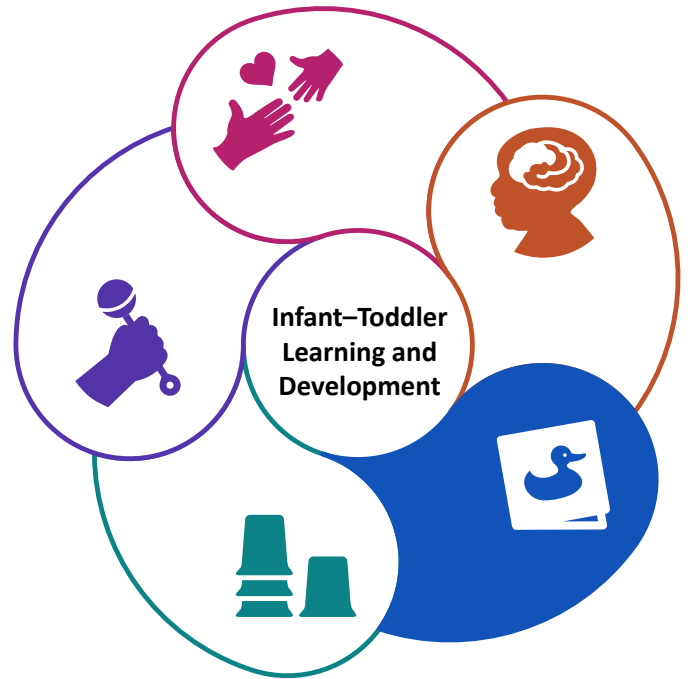




Language Development Is Connected to Development in Other Domains

An important aspect of early development, Language Development is closely related to development in other important domains, such as Social and Emotional Development, Approaches to Learning, Cognitive Development, and Perceptual and Motor Development. Children develop language within early relationships to communicate their needs and share information with their caregivers. As children learn to use language, they develop the ability to communicate their social and emotional needs to others (Irwin et al., 2002). In addition, language development is related to young children’s abilities to regulate their emotions (Roben et al., 2013; Vallotton & Ayoub, 2011) and demonstrate **empathy** for others (Ornaghi et al., 2020; Rhee et al., 2013). Understanding and using language supports children’s development of friendships with family members, peers, and others. Early language also supports the development of **executive functions**, such as **cognitive flexibility**, **inhibitory control**, and attention shifting (Kuhn et al., 2014; Romeo et al., 2022), important skills in children’s developing approaches to learning.

Language development is also closely related to children’s **motor development** and cognitive development. As children gain motor skills, their curiosity leads to exploration of their



environment. While exploring their environment, children experience language describing new objects and actions (Iverson, 2021). They often gesture to ask caregivers to label the new things they see. Learning words helps children learn to **classify** things in their world into categories, a key cognitive skill. For example, to understand that a turtle and a dog are both animals, an infant must form a cognitive category of “animal” (Nazzi & Gopnik, 2001).



The Context for Early Language Development

Children are motivated to develop language to connect with the people who are caring for them. Language allows children to communicate needs and develop a shared understanding of the world around them. Caregivers bring language, culture, and their lived experiences together, creating a shared understanding with their infant and toddler. The shared meaning created within these important caregiving relationships influences how children understand new relationships and experiences.

Language is made up of a stream of sounds or motions. Infants use experiences with their caregivers to identify the sounds of their language (or hand shapes and placements for a sign language), distinguish separate words, and use rules about the order of words in sentences. When speaking or signing to infants and toddlers, most people use a singsong tone, simpler sentences, and a slower rate of speaking or signing (Schick et al., 2022; Singh et al., 2009; Song et al., 2010). This type of speech is often called **child-directed speech**. Child-directed speech is used around the world by speakers of different languages. It helps babies learn to identify words and the structure of language. In addition to using child-directed speech, caregivers can support learning by responding to the child’s cues and where the child is directing

attention. For example, if a child points to an object across the room, a caregiver can respond to this communication by following where the infant is pointing. The caregiver can then communicate with the infant by replying, “Oh yes, there’s a picture of your family! Would you like to look at it?”

How do Infants and Toddlers Communicate?

Infants and toddlers communicate in varied ways, including through spoken language, sign language, **augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices**, vocalizations, gestures, and facial expressions.

All children develop language in the context of the culture of their families and communities.

In some cultures, caregivers frequently speak to children directly. In other cultures, children primarily learn by observing caregivers speaking to each other (Ochs & Schieffelin, 2011; Padilla-Iglesias et al., 2024; Shneidman & Goldin-Meadow, 2012). Cultures also vary in their norms around eye contact, body language, and gesturing, as well as many other aspects of communication and language.



Cultural differences are also evident in the diverse varieties of a language. No language has a single correct version. Languages have diverse varieties, with differences in vocabulary, sounds, and grammar (Christodoulou & Tsimpli, 2023; Craig & Washington, 1994; Lee-James & Washington, 2018). For example, some families may speak varieties of English based on the region they live in or their cultural community. The **language variety** a child speaks with their family is the language through which they make sense of their world and experience comfort, security, and love. Valuing the different language varieties of families supports their infants and toddlers in learning to understand and communicate with the people who are most important to them.

Children’s experiences with literacy will also vary based on their family’s cultural traditions and practices. For example, the stories, nursery rhymes, and songs children experience will vary based on their cultural and language backgrounds. In addition, children from many cultures develop early literacy knowledge primarily through storytelling rather than books (Heath, 1982; McCarty & Watahomigie, 2004; Piquemal, 2003). **Infant–toddler care educators** (care educators) should partner with families to support children in developing language and literacy in a way that makes sense for the family and maintains a connection with children’s home cultures.

Multilingual children are children who are developing in more than one language in the context of their families, communities, or early learning and care settings. Being a **multilingual child** looks different within every family, and care educators should learn from families about the languages used in the child’s home. Below are several examples of the diverse multilingual environments children experience:

- One child might experience different languages from different caregivers in their home. For example, the child may hear Vietnamese with their grandmother, who cares for the child while parents are working, and hear English with their parents.
- Another child might experience different languages from the same member of their household. For example, the child’s mother, father, and siblings may all speak Hindi and Marathi and may use both languages throughout the day. Another family might speak both Mam and Spanish but primarily use Mam at home and Spanish in the community.
- Another child might experience one language at home and another in an **early learning and care setting**. For example, the child may hear Korean from their parents and may hear primarily English in the family child care home or might hear Cantonese at home and Mandarin in the child care center.



Children draw from their knowledge in one language when learning another. Children who are learning and developing in more than one language may demonstrate skills and behaviors at different times compared to children who are developing in only one language. They will use all of their languages to communicate with their caregivers (Espinosa, 2015; García, 2011). For example, they may use words from two languages in a single sentence. **Multilingual children** may know more words in one of their languages than another or may start putting words together in phrases in one language before another. For example, a child who experiences both Mandarin and English might understand both languages but communicate mostly in Mandarin. Over time, children may shift in how much they use each of their languages.



Translanguaging

Children learn to use all of the languages in their language repertoire together, which is known as **translanguaging**. One way they may use all of their languages is by combining what they are learning across languages within a single phrase, sentence, or conversation, which is known as **code-switching**. For example, a child might say, “I need *ayuda*” (I need help), combining Spanish and English.

Because children’s brains are capable of learning more than one language, experiencing multiple languages does not confuse infants and toddlers. Supporting and responding to children’s use of their home language helps them form important foundations of language and literacy. It also strengthens connections to their families and communities.

Some children may experience trauma in the first 3 years of life, such as experiencing violence in their communities, losing or being separated from a significant caregiver, experiencing a medical crisis in their family, or facing other instabilities. Caregivers play an important role in creating a safe learning environment for the child who has experienced **trauma**. They can create stable **routines** and engage in responsive care interactions. Children who have experienced trauma may have language delays or may stop talking (De Bellis et al., 2009; Yehuda, 2005; Zajicek-Farber, 2010). An important aspect of a safe and stable learning environment is continuing to provide rich language input, including language around emotions, to support children’s language development and their ability to communicate and share meaning in a nurturing relationship.



Individual Differences in Language Development

The foundations are written to illustrate the **variability** in children’s development, acknowledging that children develop at different rates both within a domain and across domains of development. In addition, each child is unique and demonstrates their development in a variety of ways. In certain situations, some children may have diverse abilities that could benefit from alternate methods of demonstrating their development.

Children use language to learn and communicate, and each child develops language at a different rate for a wide variety of reasons.

Children use language to learn and communicate, and each child develops language at a different rate for a wide variety of reasons. For example, children with disabilities or infants who are born prematurely may take longer to understand language or express themselves through speaking or signing (Ionio et al., 2016). Children who do not yet use speech or signs to express themselves often communicate in other ways. For example, infants and younger toddlers may look toward, reach for, or move to people or objects that interest them. In this way, they communicate without speaking. Older toddlers may also communicate through moving, reaching, and gesturing. They may also use AAC devices,

such as card systems or tablet-based programs. Responding to children’s communication will support their continuing language development as well as their development in other domains.

When children have an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), care educators should consult and collaborate with the family and the rest of the IFSP team. This collaboration will support the outcomes included on the IFSP as part of inclusive learning experiences. Care educators can implement adaptations and modifications as specified in a child’s IFSP. If a child does not have an IFSP and care educators have a concern that the child’s language development is delayed, they can connect with the child’s family and collaborate in making a referral for a comprehensive developmental assessment. For children who may benefit from early identification and intervention services, the care educator often plays an important role in the referral process.

Research has shown that children with disabilities can learn more than one language and being a multilingual child does not cause or increase language delays (Byers-Heinlein & Lew-Williams, 2013). To support the child’s language growth, care educators should communicate with families about the languages that are used in the child’s home and early learning and care settings. Building trusting relationships with families helps care educators better understand the child’s individual development and ways to support the child. By doing so, families and care educators can identify areas where early intervention may be beneficial.



Language Development in Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children

Deaf and Hard of Hearing children have varying experiences with language development. The foundations in this document are inclusive of diverse language experiences, but there are some unique aspects to language development in Deaf and Hard of Hearing children to consider while reading the foundations.

Some children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing may have hearing aids or **cochlear implants** that allow them to hear spoken language, while other children may not have much or any access to sound. Families whose children use hearing aids or cochlear implants may choose to have their child develop only spoken language. Children developing spoken language with hearing aids or cochlear implants may first hear sounds later than other infants, depending on when they receive the devices, which may impact the timing of their language development.

Other families may teach their child a sign language such as **American Sign Language (ASL)**. Some children may use ASL as their only language, while other children might develop in ASL as well as in a spoken language. ASL is a language expressed with movements of the hands and face. It is a language just as English, Vietnamese, or Spanish are languages. It has its own vocabulary, word order, and grammar rules. Like spoken languages, ASL is a complex language that a child can use to express all of their needs, thoughts, and ideas. Its complexity makes it different from using “baby signs,” which is a method many care educators use to help babies (including hearing children) to communicate simple words or phrases. Since the majority of Deaf children are born to hearing families (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004), families are often learning ASL alongside their children. Because families are still learning ASL, children may receive more language input as they get older than they do as young infants, which may also impact the timing of their language development.



Language Development Foundations

The foundations statements are intended to help care educators identify how they can support children’s growth in specific areas. Children develop the behaviors and skills described in these foundations at different times and in different ways within their home, various early learning and care settings, and community contexts. Although foundations are focused on the child’s development, each foundation should be considered as developing in the context of relationships with caregivers who provide nurturance and support. It is important to keep in mind that the foundations are all related to each other and work together, rather than in isolation. The skills and knowledge described in the Language Development domain are organized into the following three strands:

- **Attending and Understanding:** This strand describes how children develop the ability to make sense of language.
- **Communicating:** This strand describes how children develop the skills to communicate through sounds, gestures, and words (oral and signed) and communicate back-and-forth with another person.
- **Early Literacy:** This strand describes how infants and toddlers learn to engage with books, stories, songs, and rhymes and begin to make meaning of these literacy experiences. While infants and toddlers are not learning to read yet, they are learning about print and how stories, songs, and rhymes are a way of creating shared experience and knowledge.

Representing Multilingual Children

Young children who are developing in more than one language may understand or express themselves more often in one of the languages or the other and may use different languages in different contexts or with different people. All foundations and examples are written to represent skills and concepts children have developed in at least one language.



Each strand starts with a description of foundational skills and capacities in the first four months followed by specific foundations related to the strand. Each foundation includes indicators and examples for three age periods across infancy and toddlerhood: 4 through 11 months, 11 through 23 months, and 23 through 36 months. Table 3 provides an overview of the foundations in Language Development for children 4 to 36 months organized by strand.

Table 3. Language Development Strands and Foundations 4 to 36 Months

Strands	Foundations
1.0: Attending and Understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1.1: Being Attentive to Communication. The developing ability to be attentive to communication cues and learn language through interactions with others. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing. • 1.2: Understanding Language. The developing ability to understand a growing number of words (oral, signed, or both) and utterances. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing.
2.0: Communicating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2.1: Communicating and Speaking. The developing ability to produce sounds, gestures, and words (oral and signed) and combine them. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing. • 2.2: Emerging Conversation Skills. The developing ability to engage in back-and-forth communication. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing.
3.0: Early Literacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 3.1: Engagement With Books, Stories, Songs, and Rhymes. The developing understanding of how to engage with books and literacy activities. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing. • 3.2: Understanding Meaning From Books and Stories. The developing ability to understand books and stories. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing.



Strand 1.0: Attending and Understanding

This strand includes the following foundations:

- [Foundation 1.1: Being Attentive to Communication](#)
- [Foundation 1.2: Understanding Language](#)



First Four Months

Infants develop their capacity to understand language through their very first interactions with their caregivers. Infants learn to distinguish between the stimuli in their environment, which over time allows them to determine the meaning of the communication from people around them. Some of the ways infants show a developing capacity to be attentive and understand in the first four months include the following:

- look toward or touch the face of someone who is interacting with them (for example, they may gaze at the face of a caregiver who is talking to them while feeding them a bottle)
- recognize the voices of familiar people who are caring for them (for example, they may smile when they hear a parent singing while rocking them)
- notice sounds in their environment (for example, they may turn to look toward a door that has been closed or startle after a falling object makes a loud noise)



Foundation 1.1: Being Attentive to Communication

The developing ability to be attentive to communication cues and learn language through interactions with others. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing.

First Four Months

Refer to [Strand 1.0: Attending and Understanding](#).

4 through 11 months

Children focus on the face, hands, or voice of a person who is communicating with them. Children also increasingly follow another person’s gaze or gesture to look at objects and people.

A child who is blind may follow cues other than visual attention, such as sound or touch.

For example, a child may:

- Smile and look at the face of an adult who holds out a hat and communicates, “Let’s put on your hat before we go outside.”
- Watch the face and hands of an adult who is reading to them in American Sign Language (ASL).

11 through 23 months

Children follow another person’s gaze or gesture to look at objects and people, looking back and forth between the other person and the object of shared attention. Children show understanding of new words experienced through interactions and watching or listening to others.

A child who is blind may follow cues other than visual attention, such as sound or touch.

For example, a child may:

- Look from a caregiver to a blue hat, back to the caregiver, and then to a yellow hat as the caregiver asks, “Do you want your blue hat or your yellow hat?” while holding and showing each hat. The child then reaches for the blue hat.

23 through 36 months

Children listen to oral language or watch signed language to learn about objects, actions, people, and ideas.

Children show increasing ability to understand words, phrases, and sentences communicated to them or others, even when the object, action, person, or idea is not present.

A child who is blind may follow cues other than visual attention, such as sound or touch.

For example, a child may:

- Move to the other side of the room and pull a hat from the dress-up box when an older child communicates during play, “I’m gonna be the cook. Where’s the chef hat?”
- Say in Tagalog and English, “*Nawala ni Dina jacket niya*” (Dina lost her jacket) after overhearing a conversation between two care educators.



Foundation 1.1: Being Attentive to Communication (*continued*)

The developing ability to be attentive to communication cues and learn language through interactions with others. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing.

4 through 11 months

- Look across the room when an older child points and says in Vietnamese, a language they share, “There’s the dog!”
- Coo when their grandmother says in a sing-song voice in Kumeyaay, “What is your name?” and says the child’s name in Kumeyaay.

11 through 23 months

- Look back and forth between an older child and a hand-sized rock sitting on a cubby shelf when the older child asks in Spanish, a language they share, “Do you want to see my new rock?” while gesturing toward the rock on the shelf.
- Move to look at a caterpillar on the ground after a care educator communicates in the child’s home language, “Come look at the caterpillar!” while pointing at the caterpillar.
- Look back and forth between a care educator, a bucket, and a sand shovel when the care educator communicates, “Should we play with this bucket and shovel?” holding up the objects as they say the words. When the care educator then asks, “Could I have the shovel?” and points at the shovel, the child says, “Shovel,” and hands the care educator the shovel.

23 through 36 months

- Observe two other children who are holding scarves around their shoulders and pretending they are capes. Later, the child holds one of the scarves toward a care educator, requesting, “I want a cape.”
- Look toward a patch of grass and flowers when a caregiver gestures at it and says in Spanish, “Look, daisies!” When the caregiver asks in Spanish, “What does the daisy smell like?” the child walks to the flowers and sniffs a daisy, then turns back to the caregiver and smiles.
- Observe an adult who is struggling to open a lid and communicating, “I’m having trouble with this!” Later in the day, while trying to reach for an object, the child communicates, “I’m having trouble!”



Foundation 1.2: Understanding Language

The developing ability to understand a growing number of words (oral, signed, or both) and utterances. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing.

First Four Months

Refer to [Strand 1.0: Attending and Understanding](#).

4 through 11 months

Children understand several familiar words and react to a caregiver’s overall tone.

For example, a child may:

- Wave arms and kick legs in excitement when a care educator says in Spanish, “I have your bottle.”
- Smile and look toward the door when a care educator communicates in the child’s home language, “Look, Daddy is here!”
- Reach up when a family member asks, “Would you like to be picked up?”
- Look to a person who has just said the child’s name.
- Start to cry after a care educator yells, “Ouch!” after dropping something on the care educator’s toe.

11 through 23 months

Children understand many words for familiar objects, people, and actions. Children demonstrate the ability to understand directions.

For example, a child may:

- Point to the milk carton when a care educator who is preparing lunch asks in Spanish, “What do you want to drink?”
- Look at a tree when a care educator says in Cantonese, “Look! A squirrel!”
- Run away across the yard when a care educator communicates in the child’s home language, “It’s time to go inside.”
- Point to their own belly button when a care educator reads the line, “Where is the belly button?” in a favorite Spanish-language picture book.

23 through 36 months

Children understand many words about a variety of topics and learn new words after experiencing them only one or two times. Children understand others’ comments, questions, requests, or stories.

For example, a child may:

- Take a milk carton off a tray when a care educator serving lunch asks in Spanish, “It’s your turn to pick. Which drink do you want?”
- Put the apples in the bigger of two bowls while helping to make a snack when the care educator communicates, “After I wash the apple, put it in the big bowl.”
- Point to the bucket in a picture book and reply, “Yeah, here!” when a care educator asks, “Do you see the bucket in the picture? It looks just like our orange one.”



Foundation 1.2: Understanding Language *(continued)*

The developing ability to understand a growing number of words (oral, signed, or both) and utterances. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing.

4 through 11 months

11 through 23 months

- Pick up a ball and respond, “Here, ball,” when an older child asks, “Where is the ball?”

23 through 36 months

- Communicate, “elephant” and “penguin” with their augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) device after an adult asks, “What animals did you see at the zoo?”
- Get their boots and jacket when a care educator says in Tagalog, “It’s raining outside. We need to wear our coats and boots to play in the rain.”
- Move to the snack table after observing a care educator tell another person, “I’m going to put out snacks.”

Language Input for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Children

All children need to experience rich language input from infancy. For children who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing, it is particularly important to ensure they receive language input early in infancy. Deaf or Hard of Hearing children may receive early language input through sign language, even if their caregivers are still learning the language. Families who choose to use hearing aids or cochlear implants for their children may choose to use sign language alongside spoken language, or if their child receives their hearing aids or cochlear implant early in infancy, they may choose to use only spoken language.



Strand 2.0: Communicating

This strand includes the following foundations:

- [Foundation 2.1: Communicating and Speaking](#)
- [Foundation 2.2: Emerging Conversation Skills](#)



First Four Months

From the time they are born, infants produce sounds, such as cries and whimpers, to communicate their needs (Harding & Golinkoff, 1979; Zeskind & Lester, 1981). As children grow older, they learn to communicate, using gestures and words, and engage with others in conversation. Before they reach this level of development, some of the ways infants communicate and interact in the first four months include the following:

- cry to express their needs or express discomfort (for example, they may cry when hungry or tired)
- make cooing sounds with their mouths, both in response to others and when alone (for example, they may coo “ahhh” in response to a caregiver saying “Hello, baby,” or coo “ooh” while lying by themselves on a blanket)
- respond to another person in a back-and-forth manner, almost like a conversation (for example, they may squeal or giggle in response to a caregiver talking to them or making silly faces, or they may respond, “ah” after a caregiver says, “ah,” as if having a conversation)



Foundation 2.1: Communicating and Speaking

The developing ability to produce sounds, gestures, and words (oral and signed) and combine them. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing.

First Four Months

Refer to [Strand 2.0: Communicating](#).

4 through 11 months

Children experiment with and practice making sounds or hand shapes. Children use sounds or gestures to communicate needs, wants, and interests.

Children who are developing in sign languages will babble by moving their hands in sign-like shapes.

11 through 23 months

Children use several words for people they know, objects they use, and actions they perform in their daily lives. Children use gestures and a few words to tell others about their needs, wants, and interests.

Children who do not yet use speech or signs to express themselves may use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, such as card systems, communication boards, or tablet-based programs.

23 through 36 months

Children use vocabulary about a variety of topics. Children communicate in a way that can be understood by a familiar person who speaks or signs the child’s language.

Children also combine words into two- or three-word sentences and modify some words (for example, changing verbs to past tense) but with many inaccuracies.

Children who do not yet use speech or signs to express themselves may use AAC devices, such as card systems, communication boards, or tablet-based programs.

For example, a child may:

- Open and close their hand in response to a caregiver who is signing to them in American Sign Language (ASL).
- Lift arms and vocalize to communicate to a caregiver the desire to be held.

For example, a child may:

- Sign “cracker” in ASL to request more crackers at snack time.
- Point to the sky and communicate “moon” on their AAC device when the moon is visible.

For example, a child may:

- Sign, “More crackers, please,” in ASL to request more crackers at snack time.
- Ask a caregiver in Cantonese, “呢個係乜嘢?” (What’s this?) while pointing at insects in a garden.



Foundation 2.1: Communicating and Speaking (*continued*)

The developing ability to produce sounds, gestures, and words (oral and signed) and combine them. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing.

4 through 11 months

- Vocalize to get attention from a family member.
- Babble, “da da da da” while playing.
- Clap their hands after dumping objects out of a container.

11 through 23 months

- Say in Samala, “*Swe’ swe*” (Sleep, sleep) while covering a teddy bear with a blanket.
- Say, “*¿Vamos parque?*” (Go to park?) in Spanish while gesturing to a photo of the family at the park.
- Say, “See Pampa” (the child’s approximation of “Grandpa”) while tugging on a caregiver’s hand, indicating that they want to go to their grandfather, who is in the next room.

23 through 36 months

- Comment, “She falled down,” when explaining why another child is crying.
- Yell in Vietnamese, “*Tới phiên tớ*” (It’s my turn!) to another child at the top of a slide.
- Tell a care educator in Spanish, “*Me gusta rojo*” (I like red) when picking out colors for painting.
- Make a request by saying in English and Spanish, “I need *ayuda*” (I need help) to a parent.



Foundation 2.2: Emerging Conversation Skills

The developing ability to engage in back-and-forth communication. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing.

First Four Months

Refer to [Strand 2.0: Communicating](#).

4 through 11 months

Children participate in back-and-forth communication through gestures, facial expressions, and sometimes limited verbal responses.

For example, a child may:

- Make cooing sounds back and forth with a caregiver who is cradling them and talking to them.
- Babble back and forth with a caregiver during a diaper change.
- Put their arms up above head when a caregiver says, “Soooo big.”

11 through 23 months

Children use gestures, words, or babbles to respond to communication from another person or to start conversations with that person.

Children who do not yet use speech or signs to express themselves may use augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) devices, such as card systems, communication boards, or tablet-based programs.

For example, a child may:

- Shake their head or express “no” when a caregiver asks if the child is ready to go back inside.
- Hold a favorite toy out to a caregiver as if asking to play. When the caregiver asks, “Should we play with this?” bounce up and down excitedly in reply.

23 through 36 months

Children engage in back-and-forth conversations in which they respond to another person about the same conversational topic in general.

Children who do not yet use speech or signs to express themselves may use AAC devices, such as card systems, communication boards, or tablet-based programs.

For example, a child may:

- Tell a caregiver, “It flied.” When the caregiver responds, “It flew? What flew?” the child replies, “The bird.”
- Say in Tagalog and English, “*Pusa ko yan. At rainbow. Love ko ang rainbow*” (That’s my kitty. And a rainbow. I love rainbows) while gesturing to scribbles they have made when asked, “*Ano yang drawing mo?*” (Can you tell me about your drawing?).



Foundation 2.2: Emerging Conversation Skills (*continued*)

The developing ability to engage in back-and-forth communication. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing.

4 through 11 months

- Try to get a caregiver to play peekaboo by hiding their own face behind a blanket, uncovering their face, and laughing.
- Try to clap hands to get a caregiver to continue playing a hand-clapping rhyme in English, “Pat-a-Cake,” or a finger-play rhyme in Spanish, “*Cuando vayas a la carnicería*” (“When You Go to the Butcher Shop”).
- Flap their hands in the air while a caregiver sings a finger play song such as “包餃子” (“Making Dumplings”) in Mandarin or “The Itsy Bitsy Spider” in English.
- Open and close their mouth trying to imitate a caregiver after the caregiver blows a raspberry (making a sound by sticking out their tongue and blowing).

11 through 23 months

- Communicate “cheese” using a card communication system when a care educator asks in the child’s home language, “What would you like with your snack today, cheese or yogurt?”
- Say in Spanish, “*Adios, mamá*” (Bye-bye, mama) and “*Adios, papá*” (Bye-bye, dada).
- Babble into a toy phone, pausing from time to time as if listening to someone on the other end.
- Respond to a caregiver’s comment about an object with a related action or comment. For example, make a barking sound after a caregiver says, “Nice doggie,” in Tagalog while patting a toy dog.
- Reply in Mandarin, “熊” (Bear) to request a favorite story, 棕熊，棕熊，你看到了什么？ (*Brown Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See?*) after a caregiver asks, “你想看书吗” (Would you like to read a book?)

23 through 36 months

- Reply in Spanish, “*Allí*” (Over there) and point to the corner when a care educator asks, “*¿Adónde está?*” (Where did it go?) When the care educator replies, “*¿Vamos a buscarlo?*” (Should we go look for it?) the child responds, “*Sí, vamos,*” (Yeah, come on) and holds out their hand for the care educator to hold.
- Nod to indicate “yes” when a care educator asks if the child would like to use the paint on the table. When the care educator asks the child what color they would like, the child points to the blue paint. After the care educator confirms, “You’d like the blue paint?” the child nods again.
- Ask a child who is sitting next to them and eating oranges, “Do you like oranges?” When the second child replies, “Yeah,” the first child responds, “I got yogurt.”



Strand 3.0: Early Literacy

This strand includes the following foundations:

- [Foundation 3.1: Engagement With Books, Stories, Songs, and Rhymes](#)
- [Foundation 3.2: Understanding Meaning From Books and Stories](#)

First Four Months

In the first four months of life, children’s responses to books, stories, songs, and rhymes look similar to their responses of attending to and understanding other language-related experiences. Some of the early ways infants engage with literacy include the following:

- watch or listen to the experience of a caregiver signing or telling them a story, reading to them, or showing and communicating about a book (for example, they may gaze at the face of a caregiver who is telling a story or reading a book, or they may reach to touch a book)
- respond to songs that are sung to them (for example, they may make cooing sounds in response to a song or become relaxed when experiencing a lullaby)





Foundation 3.1: Engagement With Books, Stories, Songs, and Rhymes

The developing understanding of how to engage with books and literacy activities. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing.

First Four Months

Refer to [Strand 3.0: Early Literacy](#).

4 through 11 months

Children watch or listen to a caregiver who is signing or telling a brief story, reading a short book, or signing or reciting a song or rhyme. Children explore books and pictures together with a caregiver.

11 through 23 months

Children watch or listen to a caregiver who is signing or telling a story, reading a book, or signing or reciting a song or rhyme. Children interact with books (such as holding, exploring covers and pages, or showing the book to a caregiver). They also participate by pointing at a book, flipping pages, or making one- or two-word comments.

23 through 36 months

Children engage with storytelling, books, songs, or rhymes by watching or listening, asking short questions, and making comments. They demonstrate basic understanding of how to interact with a book, such as turning the pages. Children also demonstrate an emerging understanding that written text represents words.

For example, a child may:

- Make sounds and wave their arms in excitement when a caregiver is reciting a song or nursery rhyme.
- Hold a book and touch the pages while a caregiver describes what is on the pages.
- Watch a caregiver who is signing a story in American Sign Language (ASL).
- Coo and babble in response to a caregiver who is singing a lullaby or telling a story to the child.

For example, a child may:

- Make hand motions as part of an interactive rhyme, such as clapping during a rhyme in Spanish, “*Tortillitas para mamá*” (“Tortillas for Mama”) or moving their hands in a circle during a song in English, “The Wheels on the Bus.”
- Attempt to turn the pages of a book, turning more than one page at a time and turning pages in different directions.
- Bring a caregiver a favorite book to read.

For example, a child may:

- Sing along with a few repetitive words in the chorus of a familiar song.
- Use their finger to flip the pages on a screen back and forth on an accessible device they are learning to use.
- Count in Mandarin, “一 二 三” (One, two, three) together with a caregiver and other children as they count objects on a felt board as part of a nursery rhyme.



Foundation 3.1: Engagement With Books, Stories, Songs, and Rhymes (*continued*)

The developing understanding of how to engage with books and literacy activities. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing.

4 through 11 months

- Chew on a board book while a caregiver reads the book.
- Rub the page of a touch-and-feel book while a caregiver reads the book.

11 through 23 months

- Open a book using a craft stick a caregiver has taped to the cover to aid the child in their **fine motor skills**.
- Communicate “soft” while touching a fuzzy page in a touch-and-feel book.
- Hold out their arms to indicate “big” when a caregiver who is telling a story says, “Show me how big you think the fish was.”
- Point to a seashell when a caregiver asks in Mandarin, “Do you see the seashell? Where is the seashell?” while reading a seek-and-find book.

23 through 36 months

- Communicate their favorite line of a story they have experienced many times when a caregiver pauses while telling the story.
- Pretend to read a book to a younger infant or stuffed animal by communicating about the pictures on each page and turning the book around to show the picture.
- Examine the text on the back of a cereal box and ask, “What’s this says?” demonstrating an understanding that the text represents words.

Providing Accessible Print Materials

Children who are blind or have low vision should receive daily opportunities to engage with books and print. Caregivers can provide these opportunities by engaging children with touch-and-feel books, books with large print or **braille**, picture books accompanied by life-sized objects representing the images in the book, or audiobooks.



Foundation 3.2: Understanding Meaning From Books and Stories

The developing ability to understand books and stories. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing.

First Four Months

Refer to [Strand 3.0: Early Literacy](#).

4 through 11 months

Children watch or listen to a caregiver who is signing or telling a brief story, reading a short book, or signing or reciting a song or rhyme. Children explore the pictures and pages of a book while a caregiver reads.

11 through 23 months

Children make connections between words or events in stories or books and in real life. Children participate in storytelling and reading by making one- or two-word comments or pointing to pages in a book while babbling, showing an understanding of elements in the story.

23 through 36 months

Children show a basic understanding of the main idea or subject of a story or book they have experienced many times.

For example, a child may:

- Pat the page of a book while a caregiver reads.
- Watch or listen to a caregiver who is signing or telling a story.
- Lift the flaps of an interactive book while a caregiver reads, although not always at the appropriate time in the book.
- Focus on a caregiver who is wiggling the child’s fingers while singing a familiar rhyme in Spanish, “*Este dedo compró un huevito*” (“This Little Finger Bought an Egg”).
- Look at pictures that a caregiver points to while reading a book.

For example, a child may:

- Pat an illustration of a character’s hat and communicate, “hat,” then pat their own head.
- Bounce up and down during their favorite part of a familiar story.
- Say or sign familiar words in their home language, such as “cup” or “bed,” when experiencing the illustrations in a book.
- Pretend to fall down and roll on the floor when a character in a familiar story falls down.

For example, a child may:

- Point to the illustration of a character in a familiar book while a caregiver is reading. Communicate, “He’s doesn’t like the eggs,” demonstrating an understanding of the message repeated throughout the book.
- Ask a caregiver in the home language to read “the ballerina book,” which is a book about a girl who is learning ballet that is one of the child’s favorites.
- Move across the room making engine sounds after experiencing a book about vehicles several times.



Foundation 3.2: Understanding Meaning From Books and Stories (*continued*)

The developing ability to understand books and stories. This development occurs in any language, such as the child’s home language or any other language that they are developing.

4 through 11 months

11 through 23 months

23 through 36 months

- Point to their ears, nose, and mouth when a caregiver points to pictures of each body part in a book about bodies and faces.
- Communicate, “moon,” while patting an illustration showing a moon through a window, then look to the window of their own room to see the moon.
- Communicate in Spanish, “*iChistoso!*” (Silly!) after experiencing a funny story many times.
- Make roaring sounds while a caregiver tells a folk tale about a bear, which the child has previously experienced several times.
- Giggle and move their legs while a caregiver reads the line, “legs that dance away” in the book *Brown Sugar Baby*, which the two have read together several times.

Storytelling Traditions

Many cultures have a rich tradition of storytelling. Experiencing stories, folk tales, and rhymes invites children to engage with literacy in a way that can connect them with cultural practices in their families and communities. Storytelling traditions are often called “oral storytelling” to highlight that the stories are passed down as they are told, but storytelling may be through spoken or signed language.